

**PICK OF TODAY'S
SHORT STORIES**

6

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Edited by John Pudney

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Foreword

There is one best-seller with which few of us can hope to compete, for it is bought every year by more than nine million British citizens. It contains thumbnail essays, informative and exhortatory, upon such human frailties as deafness, rupture and inferiority complex; such human aspirations as the securing of a nest egg at the age of fifty-five, the learning of shorthand in one week, and being a handyman about the home; such human cultural achievements as obtaining five books for the price of one 'in shortened easier-to-read form'. This enviable publication (whose circulation we have checked officially) is the Postmaster General's Five Shilling Book of Stamps.

We venture to mention it in this foreword because its pages so often carry a message to 'new writers' beneath a challenging headline '*Short Story Writing*', with the legend 'You can learn the essential technique by post'. With this we do not, of course, dare to quarrel. We simply wish we had not spent so many painstaking literary years endeavouring to learn by patience, by industry and by trial and error, that happy facility which luckier or better-integrated people can learn by post: 'how to get plots, how to construct them, how to write dialogue, and how to sell MSS.'

The availability of such tuition might seem likely to make the burden of the editor of *PICK* very nearly insupportable, as the English-speaking world might be expected to be crammed with masters of the art of short story writing, who have found an easy path to success by way of the G.P.O. Alas, this is not so. Once again we were pleasurably inundated with the works of short story writers from every part of the British Com-

FOREWORD

monwealth, yet never at any time did we find ourselves drowning in indecisive admiration amid the waves that had struck us. As before we applied the fairly humble test of what was memorable, what was entertaining, what was agreeably written, and what was neither sententious nor verbose. We found ourselves able to present more new writers than usual. That is as it should be. In doing so, nevertheless, we would like to raise our editorial hat to the established writers who continue to support PICK with enthusiasm.

Much art, wisdom and sensibility goes to the telling of an entertaining tale in a simple, straightforward form. Much of the art undoubtedly can be acquired, but a measure of it is inborn. It grows and flourishes, like poetry, as a fine and satisfying part of human self-expression. For that reason one need not be dismayed by the prophets who foresee the extinction of the short story in the all-enveloping allure of television, radio and film. In these crafts which agreeably distract our times the short story is, in fact, a basic element. The writer of a finished story may well have on his desk the life and soul of a film, television or radio play. Translation into another medium is merely a matter of technique.

Now let PICK VI, selected optimistically from more than a thousand submissions, go forward with a measure of editorial optimism, but with no suggestion of complacency except for a certain satisfaction once again in presenting new work by new writers, as well as work of distinction by established writers.

JOHN PUDNEY

42 Great Russell Street,
London, W.C.1.

P. B. ABERCROMBIE

Dear Mr. Peterhouse

The End House,
Green Lane,
Swaytheling.
10th July

Dear Mr Peterhouse,

I have more than one apology to make to you, and I hope you will not think that, because they are all contained in one letter they are any the less heartfelt and genuine than if each one had, as perhaps it ought to have, a letter to itself. I am far from believing that one grievance lessens another. Indeed, I am afraid you will agree with me that it is quite the contrary; your causes for complaint are all bound up together, they are dependent upon each other, and they devolve upon me none the less heavily for that. You must be prepared, I am afraid, to read a long letter. I am, as you know, constitutionally incapable of writing a short one, and in this case there is a great deal to say.

My first apology must be for the first cause: that I have not yet sent to you the manuscript which, I think it was three months ago, I promised you. My second, that you have written me three letters which, as it must seem to you, I have ignored. And third, that I have now even become inaccessible by telephone. There are reasons — you may call them excuses — for all these things. They are contained in what I am about to tell you — a story I am reluctant to begin, as these preliminary lines have probably already made you aware. Well, I must begin it, no matter how little heart I have for doing so.

When I saw you three months ago I was, as I told you, well on with my novel, for although a good deal of it was still only in my mind, that, after all, constitutes the essential of progress. I can look back upon that day, and the luncheon I had with you as in some peculiar way a turning point, because the day after it I took the action that has led me to the dilemma I am in now.

My novel is concerned, as you know, with a group of Americans in England and in particular with one, Bud, a young man who makes at first only a tentative appearance but who was to become — who has, I might say, now become — a main character in the drama. I wished my heroine to write to him at the American Express (although she has some idea that he has already left for Paris). I was uncertain how the American Express Company conducted its postal service. I did not wish merely to telephone and ask for the bare facts of its organization; I have, as you know, a propensity for personally undergoing, if possible, these small details of experience. My plan was to write a letter to an imaginary person, send it to the American Express, and then to go in and to enquire — as I intended that my heroine should do — whether it had been collected; I wanted to have some conversation with the clerks there, to get the atmosphere of the place and find out the possibilities of its little transactions. It was then that I made my first mistake — no, rather that was made, in the opening lines of my book. I knew, when I decided on it, that I should not have written a book whose central character bore my own name. I do not know, now, why I did so, except that it seemed to be the right one for her, and I believed that I could be detached. When I am asked for my name in a shop to which I do not intend to return, or when for some other reason I wish to conceal my real

name, I have a habit of giving that of somebody out of the novel upon which I am at present working. That is what I now did. I wrote the letter just as Harriet Wrexham might have written it, a simple note of invitation. I wrote it on my own notepaper, having no other, which is headed with my London address and telephone number. A week later I called at the American Express, pleasantly anticipating the sight of my own letter stamped, postmarked, sealed, being handled behind the official counter; I remember reflecting idly upon how, when the name of one of your characters is spoken aloud, he seems to become visible to others as well as to yourself. It is a pleasant sensation, to which I was mildly looking forward.

My first thought when they told me the letter had been called for was 'Oh good, he got it after all,' before I recollected myself; and then my heart turned over in alarm. I pressed the clerk to tell me whether she was sure such a letter had ever arrived; she was sure. It was corroborated by another clerk; they had discussed 'Bud' because they knew someone of that name: they wondered whether it was merely a nickname and as such incorrect to be found on the outside of an envelope. . . . 'A young fellow' had come in for it; they could not describe him. I recollected myself before I had pressed them too far; but they must none the less have been a little curious at my surprise that the letter should have found the person to whom it was addressed. I lamely explained that I was sure he had gone to Paris — that I had heard as much since I wrote the letter. And as there were several American citizens impatient behind me, I was forced to leave the place unsatisfied.

I could not understand, once I was at home, why the collection of the letter had so unnerved me. It was quite

clear that someone existed with the same name; at this moment it was probable that my letter lay at the bottom of a hotel wastepaper basket, thrown there with a shrug of incomprehension by someone who I was sure looked very little like my own Bud Fugate.

This rational explanation did not, however, stand me in good stead when the telephone call came. I had, during the night, come to the realization that between Harriet Wrexham and Bud Fugate a terrible love affair was inevitable. I saw them at the end of the mysterious corridors of the imagination, close together as though at a trysting place, although I did not yet know what had led them there, or by what route they had travelled.

I was sitting at my writing table when the telephone rang. I was impatient at the interruption, and made, as with my left hand I reached out to the telephone, a full stop that went right through the page. (I could show you this page, and this last mark on it. It is the only evidence I have.) When he said 'This is Bud,' at first I felt the joy that Harriet Wrexham might have felt; then, immediately, a sort of terrified excitement because I believed that something was happening that could not happen. He thanked me for my letter, and said he was indeed going off to Paris that evening; that he would get in touch with me when he came back. 'I shall see Florence while I'm there,' he said gaily, 'any messages?' I said that I had no messages, but I asked him where he would be in Paris, and whether he would like the addresses of one or two people I knew there. While he searched his pockets for paper and pencil, and even during the intervals while he wrote the addresses down, I could not bring together my scattered thoughts. I could tell how hollow and absent-minded some of my replies must have sounded as I struggled for a way

of finding out how he had got hold of my letter, why he had played the inconclusive joke of ringing up a stranger from whom a letter had reached him by mistake. But there was such an utter lack of tentativeness in his voice, such a sound ring of confidence, even, I thought, of affection, that I found myself only half-hearted in my attempts to catch him out. In any case, I was unsuccessful. He wrote down my addresses, said he had no time to come and see me before he caught his train, but promised to do so as soon as he returned. Before I could grasp at any solid fact in this strange conversation he had gone. It was only when I turned back to my writing table that some words of his came back to me, and when they did, I sat down and tears suddenly poured down my cheek, merely from the shock of it. I could hear his nice American voice again: 'I shall go and see Florence; any messages?' I got up, feeling as though I should like to rush from the room. Could I have been so wrapped up in what I was writing, so absentminded when it came to any other activities, that I could have mentioned Florence in the letter I sent to the American Express — and that I now had no recollection of doing so? I closed my eyes and summoned up the little note before them. I could see quite clearly its handful of lines on the page. That letter which had vanished, god knows where, into what hands, had contained no reference to Florence. Nobody in the world but myself knew then that in my half-finished novel such a person figures, living in Paris. She was embodied only in what I had already written; her future lay in my note book. A short future; for within a year she was to die — and Bud was to cause her death. As I realized this, the gulfs between reality and imagination yawned and closed with an echoing sound, like the noises that terrify a person who returns from a

swoon. At that moment I desperately wanted something real before me, as evidence; a recording of that confident voice on the telephone, or that letter in my hand, that I had so frivolously written. It is some three months or more since that moment and it is still vivid to me. But I shall do better to stick to the facts.

The next morning it seemed to me that, although the telephone call was genuine enough, I must have imagined the reference to Florence. My efforts to separate imagination and reality flurried and pained me. It was like trying to separate the finest of silken threads in a high wind: they tangled and caught, substituted themselves one for another, their colours mingled and swam. I looked at my notes again. It was in Paris that Bud and Florence were to become intimate, in Rome that she was to die. I dared write no more.

I took out the manuscript and looked at that final black fullstop, the signal of my casual irritation. Then, out of the anguish of inactivity I wrote a long letter and addressed it to Bud Fugate at the American Express in Paris. I begged him not to go and see Florence; I apologized for the tone of intimacy I had suddenly taken with him, which must have seemed strange after the formality of the only other letter that had passed between us, and I could give no very convincing reason for it. I wrote to the four people whose addresses I had given him in Paris, asking them to let me know if he came to see them. I would have liked to mention this casually, at the end of a letter about other things; but I could not help making Bud's possible visit the main subject, and the note of anxiety could not be kept out. During the following long, five weeks, replies to three of the four letters came drifting in. 'Your American hasn't turned up yet,' 'No sign of Bud

Fugate — what names these Americans have!’ He was supposed to stay in Paris about a month, and as the days went by I began to wonder whether the whole incident might fade away, perhaps to be recollected at some future time when the subject of imagination, and perhaps of psychological phenomena, should come up. My incapacity for writing continued. I could not take up my novel; and yet my habitual inability to work on two things at once was as adamant as ever. The characters of Bud, Harriet, Florence and the others were present with too pressing a claim to allow of any other. And yet, knowing towards what the plot was tending, I dared not write any more. I read over and over again what I had already completed, and tried to combat the overwhelming press of details which my imagination supplied for the continuation of the work. I resisted with anguish that most insistent of hungers, the desire to express, whose repression seems criminal as well as painful. It was then that your first letter came, but I could not bring myself to reply. At last one morning when I had come in from a futile and exhausting walk in the park, the telephone was ringing. It was Bud, and this time my pleasure was all my own. He had had a ‘superb’ time in Paris; he had not gone to see my friends because he had idiotically lost the piece of paper on which he had so laboriously written their addresses. I could not help asking whether he had received my letter. An audible shade of embarrassment clouded his vigorous voice, but all he said was, ‘I’m sorry you don’t like Florence.’ I helplessly tried to protest, but he went on with a sudden return of ardour, ‘I want to talk to you about Florence — she’s quite a girl you know!’ In a moment he suggested our meeting, and I seized the opportunity to ask, ‘How shall we know each other?’

'Well I should certainly recognize you,' he protested laughing, 'even if you've forgotten what I look like!'

Oh I struggled, I can't remember now, to pin him down, to fight my way out of these mysterious toils. It was no use; at the end of the conversation I was left with nothing but my sense of responsibility for him, my interest in him and a vague agreement that we should meet 'sometime'. Since then, I have spoken to him several times on the telephone, and with each conversation our knowledge of each other, and our intimacy, have increased. The fact that we do not meet has become a sort of joke between us. And all the time the weeks have been passing, and inevitably he has been talking of his visit to Rome. About a fortnight ago, knowing towards what he is innocently going, I resolutely took out the manuscript and spent a feverish day and night in working — working in that acute discomfort that comes from writing what is wrong, and untrue. I altered the plot — I have long since put the notebook away, sick of the scribbled words and dashes which I have spent so many hours in poring over. I wrote doggedly, badly, wrenching the characters and action about mercilessly, and then I made notes (knowing quite clearly the futility of it) for a different ending; I sent Bud back to America, I married Florence stupidly to somebody who could not possibly have been interested in her. I did not dare read over what I had written, knowing that in every word I had committed the sin of putting down what I knew to be untrue. When next Bud telephoned, I felt ill with the hope of hearing his altered plans. But I was not allowed to say more than a word of greeting; he is bubbling over with his plans for Rome. That was a week ago; immediately afterwards, I left for the country. I told Bud I was doing so, and invited him to come down to

Swaytheling and see me. He promised to do so as soon as he had got everything set for his trip. I told him there was no telephone at the End House, and with no pretence I begged him either to come, or to write to me. I said, I remember, 'You don't understand our relationship; I must see you, or else have something you have written.' He was very quiet and gentle. He said, 'Believe me our relationship means a lot to me; I do understand it'. Later he asked, 'Must you go away?' and spoke again of our meeting. But I had my plans made; and I was in any case at the end of my endurance of this affair.

So I have come down to the quiet country and now, after a day or two, I feel able to write letters, if nothing else. I have decided to write to you of all this so that you may know the reasons for my silence, and to confess to you at last that my manuscript is unfinished. I am afraid this will be a shock to you. By now, I should have had the first draft finished, and I should have been able to give you a date for its completion. I can only say quite simply that I hope you will forgive me.

I have just read over your three letters, and I see from the last one that once again you want to give a party for me. It is very kind of you; but I must repeat, I am afraid, that I have never been to a literary party, and I think perhaps now is too late to begin. I do not believe, as you know, that the personality of the author is of any but a very shallow interest. You tell me that it will increase my sales to 'appear'. But after all, these sales are a good deal better than I am sure, all those years ago, we either of us hoped or imagined they could be. Can we not be content with that? There is one person in whom I feel some interest; and that is the critic in, I think Bolton, who finds me 'dry, lurid and yet unreadable'. This dissentient voice

naturally has a freshness that the others lack, and to your question, in which I feel the sting of reproach, 'Is there no one you want to meet?' I would reply that I should like, if ever he is in London, a chance of facing this man, who has, perhaps salutarily, wounded me and whose words remain in my mind like gravel when praise has melted away.

I hasten to finish this letter and send it to you. I am afraid that by now my continued silence may be causing you alarm. I do not know how long it will be before I can start work again, or find the courage to return to London. I hope to hear from you here; if you will be patient, I am sure I shall one day be writing again.

Yours sincerely,

Harriet Brownleaf

DARN IT I AM HUSTLED OFF TO ROME BEFORE I MEANT
TO BE. I HAVE LOVED OUR RELATIONSHIP AS YOU
CALL IT STAY RIGHT WHERE YOU ARE I'LL BE BACK,
BUD

* * *

Swaytheling,
18th July

Dear Mr Peterhouse,

The enclosed telegram came for me last night. I am leaving for Rome immediately. I have searched my mind and am still searching it desperately for the knowledge I *must* have of the exact whereabouts of the house where Florence is staying, or if not I shall go to the American Express, he is bound to come in sometime during the first days of his stay. I cannot simply allow it to happen. Surely

my intrusion must alter things, I must surely still have some power. I will get in touch with you when I return.

Yours sincerely,

Harriet Brownleaf

* * *

The two letters and the telegram did not occupy, as they should have done, a place in Mr Peterhouse's orderly files. He had thrust the first letter into his pocket, as being too disconcerting to interrupt the prosaic harrassments of a business day; and had only withdrawn it when lights had been put out and typewriters covered in the other rooms along the corridor. Then he had spent an hour peering at the neat, elegant writing, and especially at the two or three places where one word had been substituted for another. He dwelt upon these not always effective efforts at deletion, patiently holding the pages to the light, turning them this way and that until he had discovered what the original word had been. The effect of these alterations was one of toning down — the substitution of 'pleasure' for 'joy', or 'interest' for 'love'. He found himself unable to come to any conclusion: there seemed to be a choice of several, all painful, and he was reluctant to submit the business to the judgement of his colleagues. The second letter and its enclosure, however, forced him to do so. Even then, when they had been read, re-read, handled, passed across and across the table, the deletions uncovered and the postmarks deciphered, he returned them to his pocket, and not to the filing cabinet. There they remained, and, swollen with a sheaf of obituary notices, accompanied him to Harriet Brownleaf's funeral service at St Martin in the Fields. There, before the service began he exchanged in the old portico a number of similar remarks with a succession of his associates. 'Yes, of

course it was madness to go to Rome in July . . . She was a frail creature. . . . She simply wanted to go to Rome, I suppose . . . no, her last work was still in progress . . .’ But presently he could not help hearing among the lowered voices that of his colleague, Oliver, being, he felt, uncomfortably explicit. ‘We know a chap in Rome, he interviewed the doctor. She was hurrying, apparently — hurrying, at siesta time! That made her conspicuous. Somebody noticed her from indoors; nobody was out in the street of course. What a place for her to die — almost on the steps of the American Express!’ At this, Claud Peterhouse made an effort to detach himself from his own group and to join that in which his colleague was, in his opinion, coming dangerously close to indiscretion. A general move to go inside the church, however, forestalled him; he was glad that Oliver’s revelations would soon be cut off, but he was near enough to hear him continue, almost up to the threshold. ‘A chap we know in Rome saw the doctor,’ he was repeating in a whisper, for the benefit of others who leaned towards him as they slowly moved forward, ‘it was shock, he said, but not fright; she was smiling. . . . An extraordinary business. . . .’ They were inside the hushed murmurous church, moving into the pews. Claud Peterhouse found himself looking about at the congregation with pride for his authoress that it should be so distinguished and yet, he quickly realized, with the sense too of searching for someone, of sifting for a possible clue. More than once his glance returned to a young man in a thin light suit who sat with his close-cropped head leaning on his hands in an attitude not so much of reverence as of sorrow. The service was moving, and once or twice Peterhouse, with obscure satisfaction, felt the pure and honest emotion of personal grief. He was

one of the few people who could claim to know Harriet Brownleaf. He had never managed to lure her out on to the stage, to make of her a character. Perhaps it was just as well. Sometime, somebody here would write a book about her; how little there would be to go on, other than her published works! (He fingered the sheaf of papers in his pocket and even drew it out a little way until he could see the corner of an ordinary telegraph form.)

Just before the service ended he found himself glancing round at the young American, unaccountably fluttered at the possibility of his slipping out and being lost in the crowd. As soon as he could, he left his seat and making his way amongst the slowly moving mourners who filled the aisle, he at last reached the young man, who was standing up and looking about him.

'I beg your pardon, I'm Claud Peterhouse, Harriet Brownleaf's publisher. I think we've met somewhere, haven't we . . .?'

'Bob Taylor,' said the young man, subduing a natural smile. 'I didn't know Miss Brownleaf, of course, I believe almost nobody did; but I'm a great admirer of her wonderful work.'

They talked a little further as they made their way out of the church. Beside the door, some beautiful flowers, garlands, sprays and posies, were disposed upon the big flagstones, and feeling suddenly unequal to conversation with a stranger, Peterhouse made his excuses and turned aside. He stood there a moment, staring without seeing them at the arrangements of soft petals and lustrous leaves before him. He was dissatisfied, disturbed, unable to rid himself of the feeling that now at this last moment, some explanation might be vouchsafed him. It *was* a last moment; once he had left this place, made his way back

to the office amongst the daylight crowds, no more would be revealed to him of this disturbing business. He remained there, pretending to look at the flowers and covertly scanning the passing congregation, though he scarcely knew what he was hoping to see. At last he was left almost alone in the big solemn building, still filled with the rich quiet mumbling of the organ. He began to move from his place in the shadowed corner when he saw that somebody was lingering at the door as though to speak to him. He was in no mood for conversation, and he quickly drew back, and fixed his eyes on a wreath of moss roses. It still bore the label of a florist that sent 'Flowers by wire'; the card lay at an angle among the delicate fronds. His eye passed negligently over it, then suddenly he bent and stared, and everywhere about him faded and grew dark as his attention violently focussed itself on the small white oblong, upon which the words 'From Mr Edward R. Fugate', were neatly typed.

JOHN ATKINS

Stan's Leg

THE season started badly. After only two minutes' play we saw Stan Prentice sitting on the ground in his own goalmouth, looking rather bewildered. He looked so funny I was tempted to laugh but of course it was obvious something was wrong. We crowded round him and he started to whimper. Not in pain, I think, but in fear. He lifted his foot from the ground and it dangled like a glove that has been half pulled off.

'It's broken, I think,' he said, in a whine that made me shiver. I turned away, sickened. It was less the leg than what it had done to him, made him a frightened boy.

There was a bustle, some useless enquiry, but everyone knew it was true. The leg was broken. I think most of us knew individually what should be done, but collectively we dithered. Then someone thought of Mrs Prentice. She was sitting in the bus. I said I would tell her. I didn't know her. I think I wanted to be useful, to show resource.

Perhaps I should explain why, although I played in the same team as her husband, I did not know Mrs Prentice. It was because the neighbouring village, Chindleham, had united with us to form a team. The pitch was in our village but we had to play a few men from Chindleham for the sake of unity. Stan was one of them.

When I reached the bus I saw that Mrs Prentice was alone. She was knitting. She did not appear to know that play had stopped. Her head was bent low, a flower nodding on her brown hat, and her needles clicked busily.

I put one foot on the step and said, 'Mrs Prentice!'

She looked up — a tired withered face, much older, more worn, than Stan's. But her eyes were alive, somehow accusing, and I looked away.

'I'm afraid there's been an accident, Mrs Prentice,' I said.

'Yes?' she said sharply, pausing in her knitting. She hissed the word.

'Your husband — has broken his leg.'

'The fool!' she said, her face turning even paler with anger. 'I told him — carrying on at his age! He ought to know better.'

I saw no pity. Uncomfortably I said, 'Perhaps you'd better come.'

'That I won't,' she said vehemently. 'It serves him right — if he won't take advice when it's give 'im he'll have to find 'is own way out. Turned forty, too!'

I started to walk back slowly. I didn't like the thought of telling Stan his wife wouldn't come. But I was only half-way back to where a knot of players and spectators obscured Stan when she passed me, breathing heavily. She almost ran to the goalmouth and then, abruptly, stopped. She bent and peered through a row of padded legs and trousers, but made no attempt to get by. No-one noticed her.

Just as I got back someone ran up with the news that no ambulance was available. There was always a strong demand on Saturday afternoons. There was another consultation and a spectator offered to take Stan to hospital in his car. The car was driven up and the door opened, while Stan was lifted from the ground. As they slowly carried him Mrs Prentice ducked into the car. I saw her face through the window, jerked forward, tense and

scowling. As the car drove away I saw her in the same position, ignoring Stan, grim company for a man with no stuffing left.

Just before we restarted I said to Phelps, our captain, 'She's mad at him.'

'Oh, she's always carrying on,' he said in disgust. 'Stan's past 40.' He added mysteriously, 'Wouldn't have happened if she hadn't come.'

We lost that game. We were a very sober party going back. I sat next to Ern Moss, our secretary. He was unusually quiet. I knew he was a man of deep sympathy. I felt I could understand. When a friend breaks his leg you can feel the pain in your own.

'Rotten luck,' I said.

'Yeah,' said Ern. 'But it's worse than that. The insurance premium hasn't been paid!'

'What!' I said. Each man was insured against accident. That was the club secretary's responsibility.

'I know it's my fault,' he said miserably. 'I just didn't think there'd be an accident in the first match.'

You never expect an accident in any particular match. But you had to be kind to Ern because he was always kind to everyone else.

'Still,' I said, 'it won't cost him anything. He'll get free treatment.'

'Ah, but he'll be off work while he's laid up.'

When these things happen decisions are made quickly. By the time we got back it had been decided to run a dance for Stan's benefit. A forlorn hope, because we're lucky if we clear three pounds on our dances. Still, it's something. Then someone else suggested a donation from the club. We had a little in hand. That was agreed to. But a total of eight pounds wouldn't go far.

I know we were all in two minds. Each of us felt the necessity to restrain himself, to show decency in the shadow of Stan's misfortune — which could be anyone's. At the same time public exhibition of sorrow served no purpose. We were quieter than usual, rather puzzled, anxious to break up and get to our homes. As for myself, I thought more of Mrs Prentice than of Stan.

Next day I met Overy, the policeman. He lived at Chindleham.

'How's Stan Prentice?' I asked.

'He'll be in dock for some time,' he said. 'They don't mend easy at his age.'

'Mrs Prentice didn't take it too well,' I said.

'Ah, you see, Stan's had some nasty accidents. Last season he broke his ankle. Afore that he was laid up with his back. Must be brittle.'

'What'll they do?' I asked.

He didn't want to discuss that. It was one of those questions that had no answer and it's funny how the responsibility seemed to involve everyone. It's as though the fate that governs these things pulls a name from a hat. So Overy's face suddenly brightened, after a conventional frown, and he said, 'One of the best players in the county, Stan used to be. Getting on now, a course. Mind you, he should 'ave give up, turned 40. I know I didn't, but still—'

Next week someone else filled Stan's place and it seemed the incident was finished. Apart from the dance. In time, even Ern Moss's sense of guilt would wear thin. Stan would understand. You couldn't see Stan blaming anyone for anything. But his wife —. Once the full significance of his financial position became clear, I wouldn't have been surprised if she had called on Ern, probably armed with

knitting needles, to know what he intended doing about it.

But for a time we heard no more. We did, however, get weekly news about Stan's leg from the two other Chindleham players. He was having a bad time. It wasn't only the leg. He had developed a high temperature and fever. Every bit of news was padded with, 'Of course, he's getting on, y'know.'

Sometimes I asked about his wife but they weren't very explicit. They mumbled and changed the subject. I knew what this meant. What I expected.

We had the dance. With the club donation we sent less than eight pounds to Mrs Prentice. Then the leg didn't set properly. They had to break it again and reset it. It was nearly two months before Stan even came out of the hospital --- in plaster.

'The only person who ever gave me any explicit news was Overy and I only saw him occasionally. He said Mrs Prentice had taken a job at the milk factory. Stan was at home, but quite helpless. He hobbled on a stick and it was all he could do to dress himself.

'Never saw such a change in a man,' said Overy. 'Not much joy in him nowada, '

Christmas passed, we lost and won, and memory of Stan receded. Until the spring came and we got to work on our gardens. I came out of the pub one evening and saw Overy talking to three of our fellows. They called me across. When I asked what they wanted they stood silent and rather glum.

Overy started. 'It's about Stan Prentice,' he said. 'He can't do his garden.'

Of course, I recognized immediately that this was a serious matter.

'Still bad, is he?' I hedged, wondering what it was leading to.

'Someone's got to do it. It's running wild. Mrs Prentice is busy enough as it is, going to the factory and looking after Stan.'

'Don't see why she should expect us to do it,' said Phelps.

'He's got two brothers in the village,' said Chaffey.

'They won't do it,' said Overy, as though it was something too foolish to mention.

The situation may not have been different now, but it seemed different. When the accident happened we all felt somehow partly responsible. We would have done it then. Now Stan's accident seemed to belong to another existence even if he did still use a stick.

'We got our own gardens,' said Crosbie.

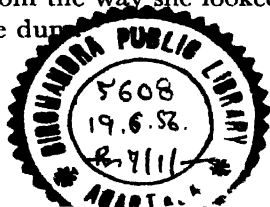
Overy sighed, gently. He hated all this diplomacy. 'If that's how you feel,' he said, 'you better tell her yourself.'

He left soon after, and the rest of us stayed awhile chewing the matter over in that assortment of grunts and half-finished sentences that was our normal method of discussion.

Phelps said, 'I suppose we better go over and see him. They're a poor set of brothers if they won't help out.'

We fixed an evening and I went home.

None of us felt very confident when we tapped on Stan's door. We only hoped we would see Stan as well as her. Four young men would be no match for Mrs Prentice. Stan was there, sitting wanly by a half-dead fire. He looked thinner. We nodded at him gravely and he opened his mouth to speak, but said nothing. His wife was still scowling. From the way she looked at us you would have said we were dupes.



Phelps foolishly said, 'We'm come about the garden.' 'Bout time too,' she snapped.

'There's others could do it,' Phelps said.

'There's others could and others won't. And if it hadn't been for all this footballing nonsense we wouldn't be where we are.'

It was terrifying a thing to have to do, to say what was in our minds, but it looked as though someone had to do it. So I said, 'We thought Stan's brothers might do it.'

'Them!' she sneered. 'They wouldn't help a dying man!'

'It's a long way up here,' said Crosbie. 'An' a tough old hill to climb.'

She singled Crosbie out and started to rave. She'd never heard of such a thing, such a lack of team spirit! Team spirit! That's what we were always on about (in fact, we never mentioned it), but when it came to the point—! Sending up a miserable seven quid, as though that would make any difference! Why, the way prices were—!

We got out as quickly as we could, and she stood in the doorway yelling after us. I had no sympathy left for Mrs. Prentice now. We felt shaken. Stan's silence had been unbearable. I could imagine what he had been through and how he had slowly but irrevocably been reduced to a silent dummy.

A drink seemed the answer, so we pushed into the 'Pure Drop'. We dipped our noses into pint glasses and barely said a word, until Chaffey suddenly whispered 'There's Lew and Bob Prentice over there.'

They were new to me. One was shorter and tubbier than Stan, the other was about Stan's build. They looked quiet enough, not so quiet as Stan was now, but very like he used to be. They looked reasonable men.

'I think we better—' I began.



We went over. Chaffey knew them. He made a remark about the spring sowing, and it was natural we should get on to gardens.

'Stan's missus wants us to dig her garden,' said Phelps.

They both roared with laughter. 'She bin on to everyone,' one of them spluttered.

'Who's going to do it?' I said.

'I dunno. The old cow better do it herself, a s'pose.'

We felt better then. Previously we had all, I am sure, felt privately that she was an old cow, but this public description, coming from the family itself, made the sentiment respectable. We bought fresh drinks and felt we would not find the Prentices difficult. They were a jovial pair. It was impossible to discuss the matter with them seriously.

'Still,' Phelps said, 'it's a bit rough on her, eh?'

'Pity it aint happened afore — with all due respect to Stan,' roared one of the brothers. 'Keep her busy.'

'I told Stan, I'd break is other leg when this un's mended,' said the other. They gurgled.

'What would you do if you were us?' I asked doubtfully.

'Do? Have another drink, that's what I'd do, and then git home afore it rains.'

We went home far more cheerfully than we had come. It was a pity about Stan, but no-one could expect us to be more fraternal than his brothers. It seemed a shame that, in their obvious delight in the discomfiture of Mrs Prentice, they should allow Stan to suffer so much. But perhaps they felt that Stan should look after himself or even that he was beyond salvation.

For the second time we forgot Stan and his leg and life seemed to be much as it was before. Except that we avoided Chindleham, which wasn't difficult. You had the

feeling that Mrs Prentice might spring up from behind a hedge or that her contorted face would glower from a cloud. I don't know how her brothers-in-law, virtually neighbours, managed. But they were magnificently impervious.

Well, the season ended, we got busy with hay-making, cricket and harvesting — and then prepared for another football season. We called a meeting and no-one even noticed that Stan didn't appear because no-one expected him. Stan was finished. He would be no more than a spectator — wife permitting. Moreover, we were now cut off from Chindleham, in sporting terms. Inter-village feuds are common here, and one had arisen between ourselves and our neighbours. This season we were to play alone.

We played four matches and then met a team from Summerlea. We were kicking about just before the start when Phelps said to me, 'Am I crazy, or is that Stan Prentice?'

It was, and he was wearing the Summerlea colours.

'Well I be damned,' said Phelps. Half a dozen of us went up to speak to him.

We shook his hand, looked at his leg, chaffed him, congratulated him, told him he was an old soldier, and were genuinely pleased to see him out again. For myself, I felt the unfortunate incident that had dragged on so long and bitterly was now really over. Whatever had happened could now be forgotten. There could be no more malice. And then I thought of Mrs Prentice and knew that malice would never die in such a woman. But Stan had none, and never had.

The game was only five minutes old when I jumped to head a ball and missed it — because there on the touch-line stood Mrs Prentice herself. And when I missed the ball

she jeered. When Summerlea scored you could have heard her cackle a mile away.

I knew we had lost. I could feel a kind of hopelessness creeping through the whole team. Above everything — the thud of the ball, the referee's whistle, the sporadic noise of the 'crowd' — we heard that old harridan — mocking, sneering, snarling, booing and, you might say, cussing. That was bad enough. But whenever we came up against Stan we played like a lot of jellyfish. Overy's words, 'must be brittle,' dinned in my ears. It was more than we could bear to put a foot within yards of Stan Prentice. We avoided him like a wise man avoids a drunkard. We panted round him like a sporting uncle when he pretends to be putting everything he's got into a game with his nephew. Stan had all the advantages of an invisible man.

When it was over the old woman set up a chattering victory chant — it vibrated over the field like a jackdaw's rattle and it was intended to hurt. After a hard game this kind of thing is liable to provoke men beyond endurance. Some of the players were shouting back at her. I could have done the same, but instead I saw Stan. I could imagine how he must be writhing inside, how utterly lonely and yet conspicuous he must feel. He was more to be pitied than we were. I went over to him.

'Well done, Stan,' I said. 'You were all over us. You ought to be playing for us, you rogue!'

'Not a hope,' he said, and then I could see he wished he hadn't said it.

'We'll get our own back next time,' I said, falling back on the eternal chit-chat footballers use for conversation.

He said very quietly, 'There won't be a next time. This is my last match.'

'But why?' I asked.

Before he could answer we heard a jeer, each syllable pointed with bitterness, floating towards us. 'Call yerselves footballers! Yer couldn't even play marbles!'

Stan was walking away. 'I see,' I said, although he didn't hear me.

It had been, quite obviously, a tremendous victory — and a defeat we could well afford.

EDGAR BATES

Subocco

THE island lay almost in the middle of the grey-blue bay. On old maps and old parchments it was called Subocco. Beyond its narrow beaches there were twenty or so cottages, which were occupied by fisherfolk who took their catch to the mainland, raised a few crops in the limited soil, kept goats and hens, and in the summer time rowed tourists and holidaymakers about the bay.

One of these fishermen was Pedrac. At least he had been a fisherman but five years previously. But one pitch-black night in a rough sea his boat had collided with one of the new motor trawlers from the mainland ports. For several months he had lain in his little cottage with a leg badly smashed. They had expected him to die — that is why they had brought him back to the island instead of taking him ashore to hospital. Better to die with one's people than in a strange place.

But the men of Subocco were tough men. Slowly Pedrac's strength had come back to him, and although his leg never mended again — and a doctor came to see him every week — yet he was able to get up and drag it around with him. 'It was the boat that broke in pieces,' Pedrac would say, 'it was not me.' But when he went to sea again he soon found that the heavy exertion brought pains to his chest which left him prostrate at the end of the day. Pedrac had to give up the sea.

Once a year the Tax Collector came from the mainland to Subocco. He would sleep in Pedrac's bed, and Pedrac would sit in a chair all night with a blanket round him.

This was what you might call the island's 'hotel service'. It helped Pedrac to make a living — a very difficult thing at the best of times on Subocco — but exceptionally so if a man could no longer fish.

Although the Tax Collector knew he was not likely to collect many taxes on the island, still he enjoyed coming across, leaving behind his stuffy office and the dust-choked streets and acquiring in their place the sea air and sunshine. Instead of taxes the islanders would ply him with fish delicacies and a little wine, and when he was well replenished they would start to talk about the taxes.

'What do you want these taxes for?' they would say.

'Well,' he would answer, wiping his chops and thinking a moment, 'There are the roads . . .'

'Roads!' they would laugh, 'But we have no roads.'

'Then there is the telegraph service.'

'Telegraph?' they would say, 'What is a telegraph?'

'It is your duty to pay these taxes. You are part of our country, your own member of Parliament votes for the Bills.'

'He never comes to see us,' they would say. 'He cannot stand the sea. He is from the northern mountains. The sea makes him sick as a dog.'

After a day or two the Tax Collector would say that he would have to go back to the mainland and fetch the police.

He would then return with two policemen, two gay young fellows who had a red stripe down their trousers and green bobbins on their epaulets. They would sleep on the beach and sunbathe and have a nice time. After a few more days, the Tax Collector would make his final demand, with the two policemen standing by, eyeing the young girls. A small sum would then be paid to the Tax Collector, about one-twentieth of what he had come for,

and he would receive a signed statement to the effect that this was only the beginning of much more to follow. The islanders would say that it didn't matter what they signed, they could not hand over what they had not got. The next day the Tax Collector and the two policemen would leave, saying that they would be back the next year, just as if they were holidaymakers sadly going home.

Pedrac, who had lost his wife a year or two before his accident, had a daughter and three sons. These all slept in the one other room in the cottage, which was built of stone from the cliff side. It was also a home for the goat and the hens in bad weather, or whenever they could manage to get in.

The sons were several years younger than the daughter whose name was Margaretta and who was 17. She was a beautiful girl, tall and well-formed, with deep dark-blue eyes. She was a fine runner and walked with grace. She swam — well — like a fish, one might say. Above all, there was her hair, black as a moonless night, yet shining with the sunlight of the summer suns, as alive as rippling corn, and as fragrant as the pure sea winds, and falling as the willow falls several inches below her waist. Every year her father sold this treasure to a tourist, whom his brother Alphonse would contact on the mainland and bring over. Putting up the Tax Collector, and other visitors who wished to stay for a night or so, and selling Margaretta's hair — these were the two things that made life possible for Pedrac and his children and helped them through the winter when there was nothing — nothing at all — and the island was cut off from the main shore.

This summer Margaretta had a lover. He was a young lad named Morel, who rowed over from a larger island six miles to the southwest, though out of sight round a

shoulder of the bay. When Margaretta had done the work of the house, and fed the chickens and milked the goat, she would run down to a lonely spot on the beach where she would find Morel waiting for her. There she would see his boat nestling on the shingle of a little cove, and he would be lying on the silver sand a little further up, his strong brown arms stretching over the pink tamarisk, and his eyes gazing into the pine trees growing out of the cliff, their branches making traceries as fine as a Gothic screen.

When he heard her coming he would close his eyes and smile with his lips tight together. She would stretch herself beside him, and he would open his eyes and take her hand and kiss her fingertips. He was a gentle lover and shy, clean and unhurried in his behaviour like all the islanders.

But more than anything else, he loved her hair. It was for him a tender passion. He never tired of taking it into his hands, of smoothing it, of combing his lips through it, and of saying again and again, 'Your hair, Margaretta, your beautiful hair.'

In the boat that Alphonse was rowing to the island sat an American and his daughter. The American's name was Elson, and his daughter's Julia.

'This is wonderful,' said Elson, lying back in the boat, and trailing his fingers in the water, 'This is the way to enjoy life. Don't you think this is wonderful, Julia?'

Julia, who was tall and thirtyish, and whose eyes were protected from the sunlight by dark glasses, said, 'It sure is wonderful, Pop. Indeed it is.'

'Margaretta's hair is wonderful,' said Alphonse. 'Wait till you see it.'

He said this because he wanted the Americans to be impressed and to pay the highest possible price for the

hair so he talked about it all the time, and had been doing so ever since he saw them alight from their saloon car on the quayside at Ormondt.

'This is sure better than going round all those sticky, stuffy . . .'

'Now Pop,' said Julia, 'You know you must not be irreverent.'

'But all the time, Julia. All the time we go to those places. Don't you think this is better to get into a little boat and row to this little island. This sure is something.'

'Wait till you see the wonderful hair,' said Alphonse.

As soon as they reached Pedrac's cottage and saw Margaretta's hair they were indeed very greatly impressed. To think that such hair could grow without any aids at all, but the sun and the wind, the rain and the salt sea! To be so alive, to have such eloquence of beauty, to be so abundant — so rich — so black — so shining . . .

'It is a shame to cut it at all,' said Julia.

'Yes. Yes,' said Pedrac. 'It is nothing. To grow hair. To cut hair. That is natural. Every year we cut it like this and it is taken away. Now it is all over the world — all the world can see Margaretta's hair . . .'

'We shall take it to our house in Philadelphia,' said Julia. 'We shall not hide it either.'

'I will give you a thousand dollars for it!' said Elson.

Both Pedrac and Alphonse looked quite overcome by this magnificent offer. They did not know exactly how much this sum of money was. But they knew it must be very much, for a 'thousand' is always very much — and it had been made without any prompting whatsoever.

'Gee Pop,' even Julia said, 'that's an awful lot of dough.'

'I mean it to be a lot,' said Elson. 'Yes indeed I do. Now let's say no more about it. Let's not talk about money any

more. Let's enjoy the beauty and the peace here.'

'You can stay here for as long as you like,' said Pedrac.

'You can stay here forever,' said Alphonse.

'Ah, forever!' sighed Elson. 'If only that were possible.'

'But you are a rich man,' said Alphonse. 'Rich enough to do any thing.'

'In the fall there are the Congressional elections,' said Elson.

'Pop is a wonderful organizer,' said Julia. 'They just can't do without him.'

'And there's our new plant at Bethlehem to re-equip . . .'

'Bethlehem,' murmured Pedrac. 'Bethlehem?'

But now Margaretta had wrapped a towel round her neck and shoulders, and sat down upon a stool, and her father had taken up a long pair of scissors and was beginning to cut the hair.

She did not mind having it cut. It had grown more and more burdensome with the passing months and sometimes it had felt like a stone draped around her, and on occasions had made her feel quite sick. It would be good to be free of it again, to run swift once more, to feel as free as a bird swooping about the heavens.

'Not too close. Don't cut it too close,' said Julia.

'Yes. Yes,' said Pedrac. 'It is yours. You have paid for it.' Within himself Pedrac was overjoyed with the thought that now there would be little difficulty in raising his sons to manhood. They would be able to have motor trawlers, and fish from the mainland ports if they so desired.

'Perhaps,' said Julia, 'there is something that Margaretta would like?'

'A sewing machine!' said Margaretta with a happy laugh, and raising her head so suddenly that she nearly caused an accident with the scissors.

'We will send you one across.'

'And anything else?' said Elson.

'A bicycle!'

'A bicycle?' said Pedrac. 'But there is no place here for riding bicycles.'

'I — I can learn to ride. Just to learn,' said Margaretta.

'She shall have a bicycle if she wants one,' said Elson, who was like a man transported, 'by my last penny she shall.'

But Margaretta really wanted the bicycle as a present for Morel. His island was big enough for riding, and he had told her more than once that he would love to possess one.

Soon the hair was all cut. It was tenderly gathered up, delicately wrapped in paper, and then carefully laid in the travelling bag that Julia had brought with her. 'It could as well be diamonds,' she said.

As the long summer evening passed slowly on, new experiences, new emotions, took hold of Elson. In all his life he had never known such natural simplicity as this, never known the orchestrated motion of the sea as the all-pervading cadences of time and space, never known the bleating of a goat at his very elbow, or the screaming of gulls so close at hand, or the smell of the earth under his feet in the very room in which he ate.

Pedrac told him that his own bed would be available for him, and Julia could sleep in Margaretta's bed. But he would have none of this. He and Julia would do their sleeping on the floor, right there beside the goat if necessary. Yes sir! It did a man good to come right down to earth like this.

That night when the household had all retired and he and Julia were left alone, Elson took out his wallet and from it extracted a wad of ten-dollar bills.

'See here, Julia,' he said, 'we'll write their names on these and hide them all about the place.'

'You've become like a boy here, Pop.'

'That's good,' he said. 'That's just how I feel. What's all this money to me. Let's make these poor people rich.'

He wrote the names — which included the names of the four boys — on the ten-dollar bills and then they began to hide them in different places — in canisters under the sugar and rice, in cracks in the walls, in cushion covers, under loose stones, in all sorts of nooks and crannies. They went on far into the night crawling about the floor and climbing on to chairs till their hands and faces were all grubby, and Elson had grown so happy he was tittering away to himself and smiling in a manner that was quite new to him. Or had not happened, as Julia had indicated, since the days of his boyhood.

The following afternoon, after the two Americans had departed in Alphonse's boat, Margaretta ran down to the cove, to Morel. She ran light-footed — light-headed — and with a smiling heart. So much good fortune all at once! So much to tell Morel!

He was there, as she knew he would be, lying where he always lay, in the silver sand a little above his boat. When he heard her approaching he closed his eyes as he always did, and did not open them again until she was close beside him, looking down upon him.

He opened his eyes. Looked up at her. But this time no smile came to his lips. It was if for some moments he did not know what he saw, and then his features took on a terrible expression, like a torturing pain.

'You hair, Margaretta, your hair!'

'Morel, I will tell you . . .'

'Your hair! Your hair!'

He rose to his feet, full of an anger she had never known, 'Where has it gone?'

She was frightened now of the mood in him. 'My father's cut it. We've sold it . . .'

'Sold it! Sold it! Sold your hair!'

'Morel! Please don't be angry.' Her voice was subdued. 'We had got lots of money for it . . . I have got a bicycle for you, Morel. . . . We can be rich, Morel . . .'

He took her roughly by the shoulders. 'Sold your hair! Sold your hair!'

'Morel!' She put up her face to his. 'Kiss me, Morel!'

'No!'

'Morel! It is still me!'

'No! It isn't you.'

'I haven't changed, Morel!'

'You *have* changed. You're an old crone — baldheaded — skinned . . .'

'Morel! Morel!' Now a flash of temper lit her own eyes. 'You say cruel things. You don't love me. You loved only my hair. Only my hair.'

'Yes. I loved it. And you've sold it!'

He turned abruptly away from her. Walked towards his boat.

She ran after him.

'What are you doing?' she cried.

'Going!'

'Morel! You can't go. You can't!'

He was finished with words now. Determinedly he pushed the boat down the shingle towards the water. She tried to climb into the boat but he pushed her aside. She came back, clung frantically to his clothes, but again he pushed her off, this time more vigorously, and she tumbled

down on the wet shingle and she stayed there with all active resistance gone. She watched him climb into the boat, take up the oars and begin to pull away into the sea. He did not take his eyes away from her, his face was as white as the sea-spume, his lips trembled, but he continued to row.

Sobs convulsed her as she lay helpless on the beach, the sea widening between them. After a time she grew quite still. Thoughts flowed back into her mind, and she began to realize that she *was* different, that the loss of her hair had changed her, that she had terribly wronged Morel, whose love had been innocent and had never set a price, that she had been caught in a horrible trap of which she had had no previous knowledge.

Not till he was a faint speck far out on the water did she rise to her feet. Without any conscious thought now of what she did, she raced back along the cliff path to her father's cottage.

She found Pedrac in the little room where they ate their meals, a smile upon his lips, a ten-dollar bill in his hand, which he extended towards her as she rushed in. She took hold of it, tore it into pieces, threw it contemptuously to the ground.

'Margaretta, why do you do that? It is very silly.'

'You have sold my happiness . . .'

'Your happiness?'

'My happiness. My dreams. My love — sold them.'

'That is wild talk, Margaretta. Those Americans were very kind to us. Very kind people. Think of the others — the bargain the Dutchman drove — the haggling with the Englishman for just a few pounds . . .'

'You have sold my hair! Sold everything! Everything!'

'Nonsense, Margaretta!' But noticing how greatly his

daughter was disturbed, he tried to reassure her: 'Anyway, the whole idea was Alphonse's. It is your Uncle who makes up all the stories — who fools the tourists — we are lucky to get away with a single penny. Your hair is not really . . .'

'He has gone! . . . Gone! . . . Gone!'

'What are you saying? Who has gone? You are delirious, child.'

'I'm no child to you.'

'What did you say?'

'I'm just a goat you keep for its milk, a hen you keep for its eggs, a sheep to be sheared!'

Her father's wrath burst like a thunderclap. 'How dare you say such things. Come here, wicked girl, come here.'

'No, I won't come. I hate you, father, I hate you.'

The crippled fisherman, still further enraged by this fierce denunciation, moved quickly round the table to try and reach his daughter's side. But she was too fast for him and was out of the door and racing down the path again.

'Go then. Go!' he called from the doorway, knowing it would be useless for him to pursue her. 'Go! And never come back here any more! God have mercy on you, you ungrateful creature!'

She ran on, on, back to the little cove, to the silent, empty, poignant cove, and now there was no boat there, no Morel among the tamarisk, and even far out on the distant waters, there was no faint speck to mark his going.

But she would go after him.

'Morel! Morel!' she cried, and for answer only the seagulls cried back. 'I'm coming, Morel. I'm coming!' She had reached the water's edge. But she did not stop. She went on into the water, and although she could swim extremely well, she did not start to swim, but went on

walking, walking into the water, until it covered her limbs, and then her waist, and then her heaving bosom, and then her lips, and then her dark-blue, pain-filled eyes, and last of all her close-cropped head, and never more did any part of her emerge above the waves.

That is the story of the legend of Subocco, and if you are ever a tourist in the bay they will take you out in their little boats, and row you about, and tell you this sad story, after which you will pay them a little money.

But if you are wise you will not land upon the island, for nobody there now wishes to see tourists, least of all the crippled, unhappy fisherman, Pedrac, while in a house in Philadelphia there is a travelling bag full of shimmering black hair, which no-one any longer cares to own.

LESLIE BONNET

Proud Lady Yun

THE season of great heat was being especially oppressive. Old Chengtu, that fat city set in the western plains, sweated within its walls. The watered fields outside it, which ran up to the very ramparts, danced in a green and golden sheen.

Towards early afternoon the humid glare diminished, while the air grew more oppressive. The harsh sun withdrew itself in darkening vapour. A thunderstorm swept down from the icy western mountain barrier. While the thunder rattled in fearful nearness, great spouts of rain emptied the streets.

In the mean street called Happy Goings only Li Hsing remained to brave the storm. He sat stolidly on the uneven pavement, leaning his back upon the wall of the eating-house. Great gouts of water from the swilling roof smote him on the head and shoulders. His chin was thrust forward upon his chest. The drenched cotton tunic and pants of faded blue revealed a muscular and agreeable frame. A sodden placard hanging from his neck proclaimed in bold and crudely executed characters that Li Hsing had eaten of a meal in the eating-house and had failed to pay for it.

The fierce cascade was quickly obliterating this announcement; but the situation was too common for anyone to mistake. According to custom, Li Hsing must sit there until the eating-house proprietor had time to deal with him, or until some friend or charitable person, seeing his plight, should set matters right.

And so he sat, while the great raindrops clattered upon the deserted street.

Though what could be seen of his features showed no sign of discomfort or uneasiness, his mind was crowded with unhappy thoughts. He had come into the city early that morning from the small farm which he tended alone. For fifteen dusty li he had trundled the barrow with its flaccid load. The wheel, wooden hub on wooden axle, had squeaked its devil-scaring protest. The pig, roped in the barrow upside down, a few branches of greenery fastened on its belly so that the heat should not reduce weight by perspiration, had protested too, until the steaming heat had quieted it.

A good sale in the market, a chance meeting, then the sale of the barrow as well, to a keen buyer at a good price, had loosed Li Hsing in the city with money and an appetite.

Alas, when he had risen after a hearty meal in the eating-house he found that his money had been parted from him somewhere, doubtless in the thronging streets. The eating-house proprietor had no partiality for unknown young peasants. That is why Li Hsing now shrank under the lash of rain outside when everybody else sheltered from the storm.

However, as it is said, every trouble must pass, if only to make room for a fresh one, and the storm soon rolled away over the shining plain and the sun groped through tattered and flying clouds to touch with warmth the streets of Chengtu and the chill limbs of the patient Li.

And the people walked in the bright street again and the cries of carriers, the shouts of porters, and the important voices of those who conducted people of consequence all sounded once more in a beautiful hubbub,

Li looked up without hope or interest and saw, stationary in the middle of the street, a sedan-chair of exquisite fashion, most delicately decorated. And, while the bearers stood motionless, one who seemed to be a major-domo approached the squatting peasant, with huge dignity and with obvious distaste.

'O nothing,' he inquired of Li with carefully calculated condescension, 'what is the price of thy release so execrably painted upon this filthy notice?'

Li told him. The major-domo gave a long silken bag of money that he held in one hand a contemptuous shake and stalked into the eating-house.

Meanwhile, Li regarded the sedan-chair with renewed interest. He could see nothing of the occupant, though from an occasional twitching of one of the curtains he was led to believe that he was being observed himself. While he still gazed, the major-domo came out on to the pavement, followed by the eating-house proprietor who was bowing profusely and with great rapidity. And to Li's surprise, he found himself included in the bows and the smiles.

The major-domo stood over Li and motioned him to rise. 'The Lady Yun,' he said, 'has been graciously pleased to pay your score. It will be necessary for you to attend and thank her. Follow the chair, but at such a distance as befits a noisome person.'

The major-domo said something deferential to the occupant of the chair. The bearers uttered a despairing cry and took up their burden again. And, as the chair moved off, Li padded along behind it, soaked clothing moulded to his broad limbs.

Outside a great silent building that backed windowless on to a little street, the sedan-chair stopped, and a lady,

veiled and cloaked in glittering drapery, was assisted out and entered through a heavy door of blackened timber. The major-domo signalled to Li to wait, and followed the lady. Presently he returned and took Li inside.

Li had never seen so rich a place. He followed his mentor through chambers that glowed with colour and sparkled with light. Finally the major-domo pushed Li through tinkling curtains into a room where the light was more dim. At the end of it, standing where a window cast a bright beam of diffused sunshine, was the lady.

She was tall and slim and the light hands that escaped from the long sleeves as they pressed her breasts were of rare fragility. The glistening black hair, piled high, and set with jewelled flowers, framed a face honey-pale, painted redly a little on cheeks and brow. The up-slanting eyes were dark and bright. Delicate nostrils trembled very slightly. The tunic she wore was of peacock blue and the gown beneath it smouldered red. On her face was an expression of complete disdain.

Li stood, shifting his feet uncomfortably in an agony of awkwardness. At last he was able to speak. 'This insignificant person,' he said, and his uncouth country tongue stumbled over the words, 'this insignificant person offers humble thanks and grateful prayers.'

The lady stopped him. 'You have not suffered any ill from your exposure?'

Li hardly knew what she meant. The thought of a wetting causing anyone any harm had never occurred to him. He nodded ambiguously and bowed again.

'You are strong and in good health?' the lady asked.

Li assured her that he was. The lady drifted towards him with a sighing of silk. She stood beside him and looked up at him searchingly. 'Well?' she said.

Li knelt quickly in a humble attitude before her. How firmly his neat head was set upon those great shoulders! Then, rising to his feet, he renewed his thanks and bowed his way out.

He found the major-domo in another room and followed him to the street door where he was handed over to the door-keeper.

This lower official looked at Li with some interest as he let him out. Then, leaving the door agape, he stood gazing after him as he started down the street.

Li hesitated, then glanced back. He saw a spare-looking little man with a thin wisp of grey beard carefully filling a long pipe and gazing quizzically at him the while. Li moved slowly back to him. The door-keeper looked up with the grin of the ageing. He gave a jerk with his pipe, 'Well, my fine big fellow?'

Li, with awkward curiosity, asked him about his mistress. The little old man was disposed to talk.

'This is the house of the great Lady Yun, young man. Her husband was the Lord Chang, dead these seven years. Very young the Lady was, a wife for only a year or two. The Lord Chang was one of the great ones in this city, a very busy personage. A strange one he was, with his comings and goings and his books and his posts. A very strange one.

'And since then my Lady is a proud lady and most lonely. She enjoys the high esteem of the Governor and of the Magistrate and of such superior persons. But she will live solitary and will allow no man with her. In truth young fellow, I myself have heard her express herself very strongly on such matters. Fancy that, now. Indeed, I marvel that you should have been admitted in this way, especially such a gross, offensive fellow as you are.'

A little hurt at this last remark, Li thanked him for his information and went slowly and thoughtfully out of the city. But when in the cool of the evening he reached the little hut where he lived on his farm, he had turned his thoughts completely from this experience and was planning how to work a little harder to make up for his lost money.

And through the summer days he toiled with all his fresh, brawny strength on the small plot of farm that Heaven had given him. The rice ripened and was cut, and good weather blessed the crop.

And one day when, with several neighbours, Li was threshing the rice, visitors arrived.

With tired muscles and heaving breasts the neighbours were thwacking sheaves of rice on to the edge of a wooden barrel, so that the ears were shaken off and fell inside. So busy were they, that none saw the two approaching men until one of them, speaking in a loud voice said, 'Which is the farmer Li Hsing?'

The work stopped and Li stepped forward with a courteous smile. The two men immediately seized him roughly, one at each arm. Li shook them off and sent them sprawling. The men got to their feet, shouting with alarm.

'Ignorant malefactor!' cried one. 'To assault the tax collectors! This thief owes six taels of silver in taxes. We are sent by the Governor to apprehend him.'

Li's companions fell back, and he himself stepped forward with a smile that asked pardon for his rudeness. He owed no taxes and, in his simplicity, thought it only necessary to explain this.

The two officials would listen to no excuses. They threatened to return with soldiers if Li showed further

resistance, and so persuaded him to be led away.

Along the dusty road, through the golden fields, Li was led towards Chengtu. As they came nearer to the city so the cries of his two conductors increased; and, as they pushed a way through the crowded east gate, they were already proclaiming loudly that here was a dangerous ill-doer whom they had captured, and, for the enjoyment of the crowd, they were explaining in some detail the personal discomforts to which he would shortly be put.

Li bore it all with puzzled resignation and was hurrying along between his captors with crowd-placating smiles when a shout brought the three to a halt.

It was the major-domo. He stood in the street before them and called loudly upon them to stay their steps.

Within a trice the bewildered Li was released by the tax officials and was following the major-domo down the street. His conductor turned and addressed him. 'Well for you, young fellow,' he said in rather more agreeable tones than formerly, 'that the Lady Yun heard of your plight.'

Li could not but agree with him and considered it marvellous that one so great should have heard of his trouble so quickly.

For the second time within a month he found himself in the dim-lit room, thanking the Lady Yun.

This day she wore a simple silken gown of palest blue, in the style that a peasant girl would have worn on a day of festival. Li thought she looked more beautiful than he had remembered. But, though her words were kind, her manner was still tinged with contempt.

When he had thanked her Li was invited to seat himself and drink a cup of tea. When the tea was come, the Lady Yun waited upon him herself. Li thought this extremely

condescending of her, and he congratulated himself and drank his tea with clumsy enjoyment. Then he rose and renewed his thanks and excused himself, saying that he must return and help with the threshing.

The Lady Yun smiled coldly into his eager, lean face. 'Of course,' she said, 'the threshing must mean much to you.'

Li was led out in the same manner as before. As they went Li heard a crash in the room he had left. No doubt the lady had dropped some ornament, he thought to himself. The major-domo muttered and walked faster. As he went out into the street, Li heard the door-keeper chuckle, though there was nothing at which to laugh.

It has frequently been remarked that once the attention of evil spirits is drawn to a person he becomes the victim of successive shocks. Therefore, Li was scarcely even surprised when a week later, as he travelled back from Kwan Hsien one evening, four fellows of ruffianly aspect leapt out at him as he passed through a grove of trees and threatened him with very wicked-looking swords.

Li could not understand why bandits should seize upon a person so obviously poor; but he did not think it wise to discuss this point with them, and therefore allowed himself to be led away with the very minimum of fuss.

'Perhaps,' he thought to himself, 'the number of their band has been depleted by death and they wish to add to themselves some stout fellows. And he even pondered whether it would not be to his own advantage to take up such a profession and to forsake the farming occupation where one seemed to be the butt of every ill-wisher.

But the robbers did not broach this subject to him. Their headquarters were in a warren of ruined buildings only some seven li from the city walls of Chengtu; and here he

was treated with rough kindness, shared the bandits' excellent evening meal and went to sleep in some discomfort, but with a simple trust that all would turn out well.

And in the morning his confidence was justified; for, only two hours after the sun had risen, the aloof figure of the major-domo of the Lady Yun stalked majestically into the bandits' den. What passed between them Li did not hear; but within the hour he was following the major-domo back towards Chengtu.

And when the afternoon was young he was once more in the now almost familiar presence of the lovely Lady herself. She wore but a loose gown of a soft greenness. Li felt quite uncomfortable in that he had obviously disturbed her when at rest. He thanked her with an ease which practice was beginning to perfect in him. But the Lady herself seemed to lose her confidence as her protégé increased his.

'It is almost as if she were afraid of me,' said Li to himself with some amusement, as he saw the swift colour come and go on her cheeks, and as he marked the hand that trembled as she touched the flowers in her hair. However, it was not his place to wonder or surmise, and he contented himself with profuse thanks.

The Lady Yun asked him how the harvest had fared, and then, how he lived, what he ate, and many such aimless questions. And as he answered her truly, she looked up at him in a wistful manner.

'It is as if she seeks to stay me,' thought Li, and laughed at his foolish thought. 'She must in truth be very tired.' And he offered his renewed thanks for his further deliverance.

The Lady Yun smiled agreeably and invited him to be

seated; but Li made the excuse that he must hurry home. He was concerned about the health of his water-buffalo.

The lady made a curious remark.

'As you prefer, of course,' she said. And then she laughed quite freely and asked Li, 'Are you very fond of your water-buffalo?'

'Oh, yes!' said Li warmly, and bowed himself out. As he turned to part the curtains a delicate teacup shattered on the back of his head.

It did not hurt a great deal and Li thought it best not to look round. 'These great people have strange ways,' he said to himself. 'One must take the bad with the good.' And he went home.

As he went he wondered why the gate-porter had winked at him. Doubtless, it was the small cut on his head that had amused him.

When he was arrested on a false charge of murder about eight days later the simple Li did not even feel concerned. He accompanied the bailiffs to the prison-house with the greatest unconcern. He greeted the lesser gaoler, who received him, with confident friendliness. He felt certain that heaven and the Lady Yun would send the majordomo to him. And so, when next morning the Chief Gaoler paid his customary visit of courtesy, Li expected to see behind him the inevitable stout figure of the Lady Yun's retainer. But to his surprise, the Chief Gaoler was alone. And when, in answer to this man's pleasant inquiry Li confessed that he had no presents of value to make to him, he was quite astonished to find himself hustled out into a grim yard, where he was seized upon by two villainous-looking creatures who began soundly to beat the great muscles on his shoulders with pliant bamboo poles.

Li was shouting with all his might when the major-domo did arrive. This efficient servant had in fact been detained by an unexpected encounter on his way and was puffing with importance and anxiety when he burst into the yard with the Chief Gaoler.

Loud commands brought the beating to an end and the hapless Li was handed over to his official protector with apologies and with pleasant words. This time, as they went towards the great house, the major-domo was so upset that he was more talkative than was his wont.

'Hurry, O fortunate Lord,' he panted to the lumbering Li.

Li was astonished at his odd mode of address. 'What, sir, must I do now?' he asked.

'It is necessary that you be bathed and have your back dressed and be clothed in seemly raiment,' said the major-domo, with every appearance of anxiety and haste. 'The great Lady Yun is smashing everything within her sight. I fear for myself, and hope to deserve your intervention, my good Lord, on my behalf.'

Li kept up with him as well as he could while they hurried along.

'What can the Lady Yun want?' he asked himself.

Once again, here was the familiar black door. The major-domo drew him on with deferential addresses. The gate porter was bowing.

'Surely these are all mad people,' said Li to himself.

GEORGE BRADY

Dead Marchin' Saul

THERE'S no Bands nowadays,' said Andy McGrath. 'Not what *I'd* call Bands. If you heard the Coopers' Band playing the big selection from *Lucia di Lammermoor* in the old days you'd know what music was.'

'The Garda Band in Dublin are broadcasting a selection from *Lucia di Lammermoor* tomorrow night,' I told him.

We were talking at the top of Shandon Street. The old man pushed back his hat to scratch his head.

'D'ye tell me so? Lu-chee-a,' he enunciated the syllables softly. 'That's Donizetti — will it be Boosey's arrangement?'

I told him I couldn't say, but anyway if he'd like to come to my place at half-nine he could hear it.

So Andy came up and we listened in. When it was over he leaned back in his chair and shook his head.

'That's not Boosey's arrangement,' he growled. 'Sure they cut out half of the sextette. How long did it last? Fifteen minutes! D'ye know, the selection we used to play long ago in the Coopers' Band lasted over half an hour. Ah! great days; the band-stand on the Marina on a summer evening and the crowds listening — with the evening sun goin' down through the trees and the children lyin' on the grass. *Lyndy di Chamouni*, *Moses in Egypt*, *The Barber of Seville*, *Gungl's Imortalien Waltzes*, *Riplin' Rill Polka* and *Patrick's Day* to finish up. Sure I remember all the programmes — wasn't I the Secretary.

'We used to go down the river too — Sunday excursions on the river steamers — *The City of Cork* and the *Albert* — that was in the days before the Parnell split.

'Ah, I could tell you a lot about Bands — if you'd heard the Coopers' Band long ago when old Dan McCarthy was conductin' you'd know what music was. Wireless!' He shrugged contemptuously.

'Old Dan was a martinet — but so he had to be, the boys were a bit wild, and the drink was cheap in them days — six pints of porter for a bob and a glass of whiskey for fourpence. Old McCarthy couldn't leave the Band when they were on a special engagement until after the programme was over. If they got away from him in the interval they were a different Band.

'“Me reputation will be ruined,”’ he used to say, “totally ruined.”

'And he did have a reputation to lose — sure the English Military Bandsmen used to come to listen to us. And so well they might—

'Listen! did I ever tell you how Dan McCarthy rehearsed the Dead March for his own funeral? Ah, man alive, no one ever heard the likes of that.

'Old Dan, ye know, lived at the corner of Half-moon Street opposite Pope's Quay, and the Bandroom was on the other side of the street a few doors down. Awkward for the lads, d'ye see, if they happened to be playing a game o' cards, or if wan of them was playin' a passage be himself and went wrong. Old Dan would be out of his house and up the Bandroom stairs in a jiffy. He'd say, “Gimme that instrument, boy. Listen — *this* is how it goes.” And that passage would have to be right before old Dan would leave.

'They only paid him for two practices a week — but he didn't care how much time he spent with them as long as he got the music right. He wasn't a big man, but you couldn't say “boo” to him. He always wore a top hat and

a frock coat. Many a time he was taken for a priest — the children hoppin' out in front of him an bobbin'. He was always teaching and could play any instrument from the piccolo down to the brass bass.

'Well, I was tellin' you how he rehearsed Handel's Dead March, "Dead Marchin' Saul" as we used to call it.

'It was how he got cold one time and it settled on his chest and didn't it turn to pneumonia. His poor wife was in an awful state — a wisp of a woman she was "He's goin' from me," she says, "what'll I do—" I was talking to her at her door.

' "Not at all, Ma'am," says I, "sure your good man will be conductin' the boys for many a day yet."

' "Oh, Andy," sayd she, "he's that weak, he can't raise his head from the pillow — he has no mind for anything in this world."

'That was the trouble d'ye see, the pneumonia had gone and left him as weak as a new-born baby and he wouldn't stir himself.

'Well, I went back to the Bandroom and I a sorry man. I says to the boys, "'Tis all up — he's dyin'." An' one of them answered me, "He'll have the greatest funeral anyone ever had in Cork."

'Suddenly I calls out, "But what about the Dead March? We'll have to play that for him. Get out the parts," I says, at once, "we must try it over." We can't go through the streets of Cork after Dan McCarthy playin' a thing we never rehearsed. We'd be the laughin' stock of the whole city. And he that particular, he'd be turning in his coffin, not to mind his grave. Get out the parts, boys."

' "But—" says one of them, "he's only three doors down and he'll hear us practisin' Dead Marchin' Saul for himself — that would be awful."

“Wasn’t his wife tellin’ me now,” says I, “he’s sinkin’ fast. He don’t hear anything. He’s in a catamouse condition, and he won’t know anything at all about it. Sure ’tis mainly flutes and clarinets anyway.”

“An’ who’s to play the flute parts?” asks Paddy Wilson, and we looked at one another. Tim Mahon, our first flute, was away on a job, and we knew Christie Sullivan was no use in readin’. Every note had to be put into him, in a manner of speakin’.

“Is it me play!” says Christie in a panic.

“‘Twill be all right,” I told him, “I’ll put you over it. Sure ’tis only minims and crotches.” “But d’ye know it?” says Christie.

“Come on,” says I, “if you can’t count, some of us can.”

And then someone asked me, “What about the last page where the brass comes in? Won’t Mr McCarthy hear that? And won’t he hear the beat o’ the drum?”

So I tells them “We’ll mute the brass, and O’Brien can tap out the drum part on a chair. Sure if Dan McCarthy dies tomorrow, we have only another day.” And so we started off.

Well, we were practising for about half an hour or so. ’Twas a dark evening and the gas was on, shinin’ down on the music, with the Bandroom around in shadow. I was in McCarthy’s place conductin’ as well as I could. We were havin’ a bit of trouble, but the Boys weren’t doin’ too bad at all, no, not too bad — considerin’. Of course I wasn’t a real conductor — not like Mr McCarthy, and I had me hands full between countin’ the time for Christie Sullivan and the flutes, and watching the clarinets. I had to keep the brass from coming in too soon an’ I was trying to get the beat of the muffled drum that was only tappin’

on the back of a chair. As I say, I was in the middle of it all, when I felt a tug at me sleeve. I looked round and there was that little wisp of a woman, Annie McCarthy, standing behind me without hat or coat. I stopped the Band at once.

“He’s dead, the Lord have mercy on him,” says I. “And we’re only after doing a page.”

“Mr McGrath,” she said, like a child that would be, sent on a message, “me husband said to tell you that you’re cutting the bars short.”

“Holy smoke,” says I, “he’s listening to us, and we’re practising the Dead March for his own funeral — we can’t go on.”

“You must go on,” says she in the same tone of voice — “but don’t leave Christie Sullivan play sharp the way he’s doin’.”

“How can I stop him?” I asked her.

“Himself says he’s overblowin’,” she answered.

“D’ye hear that, Christie?” says I — “Mr McCarthy says you’re blowing too hard.” “I was only doin’ my best,” Christie says.

“Well, your best is too much—” I told him.

“But Mrs McCarthy,” I says, “we can’t go on practising the Dead March for your husband’s funeral and he listening to us.”

“He told me to tell you,” she answered back, “to put in the drum, and bring out the brass properly and don’t be playin’ like a lot of children.”

“Well, well,” I said to her, “d’ye mean to tell me he wants us to keep on practising the Dead March for himself?”

“Yes,” she told me, “He says he’s perfectly resigned to go, and he asked me to prop him up in the bed so that he

could hear ye better. I must go back to him at once."

'An' out she went, leaving us staring at one another.

'So we practised hard that night, and by Joseph, they began to get into it. Sure we were heard across the river when the trombones and trumpets came in at the end, and O'Brien excelled himself altogether on the bass drum. At the end of the practice I began to think to meself, Dan McCarthy will have a funeral the like wasn't seen in Cork since they brought home Collins, the Arctic Explorer, from the North Pole. On me way home I knocked at McCarthy's to know how he was. His wife came down to me.

"Whisht—" says she, "he's asleep— He fell off listening to the Band. He said he'd be happy to die if the Brass got the last two bars in tune."

"We'll get it tomorrow. But will he live?" — I was goin' to say for the funeral — for I was all mixed up like.

"I don't know," she said.

'I called again the next day and I goin' to me dinner. "He had a cup o' tea this morning," Mrs McCarthy told me. "The doctor says he's only barely holding on." The poor woman look'd frailer than ever, but she had a message for me. "Himself wants you to run up the Band-room when you're coming back and get the score o' the Dead March for him, and you can call for it when you're goin' to the practice tonight."

'I was knocked stunned. "What do he want it for?" I asked.

"We must humour him," she says. "He only wants to look at it."

'We had a grand practice that night — a full attendance and Tim Mahon was back again, and so our flutes were grand and the clarinets and brass as well. As for me, I was beginning to feel like a proper conductor — gettin' con-

fidence d'ye see. Oh, I don't deny there was some trouble, still everything was going fine. But, at the end of the practice, there was Annie McCarthy herself at me elbow.

' "Mr McGrath," she said again, like a child saying its lesson by rote, "Himself says why the blazes can't the brass get the notes in the last bars right. And he wants to know is it clarinets he's listening to or a bag o' cats. Can't Andy McGrath beat four in a bar without turning Dead Marchin' Saul into a barndance?"

' Well, that took me breath away. "Sure Ma'am," says I, "we can only do our best, and if Dan thinks he can do better—" and I stopped dead.

' "Hush," she said, and slipped away before I could say any more. But there was a different light in her eyes.

' Next day he sent word for me to come and see him. I found him in bed, propped up with pillows, weak and pale — a ghost of himself.

' "Mick," says he to me under his breath, "you will never have that march ready in time. What day is this?"

' "Wednesday," I told him.

' "D'ye think," says he, "that if I held out till Saturday you could play the Dead March on Sunday?"

' "Make your mind easy," says I. "'Twill be splendid by Sunday" — forgettin' what I was saying — "and the whole o' Cork will walk," says I.

' "Well, I hope 'twill be all right," he says. "But if you rushes the climax, the whole thing is ruined. And the melody," says he, "must soar up before it falls at the end. It's the trumpets," he says — "it's the trumpets. I'd be resigned to go to me long home if I thought you'd have it off by Sunday. But we must only hope for the best. And remember," he said, "'Tisn't for me only you'll be playin'

the Dead March, but for all the men that ever came into this world."

"That was Wednesday, but it was on Thursday night we got the surprise of our lives. We were going along — joggin' along, as you might say, and I thought I had the clarinets nicely toned down, when I felt the door of the Bandroom opening behind me just as I was working up to the climax. All the boys stopped playing, and I saw they were not looking at me but behind me, with their mouths and their eyes wide open.

"I turned around, and there was Dan McCarthy with his top hat and his long overcoat and muffler and his wife standin' behind him frightened looking. He spoke quiet-like, in a low, hoarse voice that got stronger as it went on. "Men," says he, "if the Dead March from Saul by George Frederick Handel is to be played at *my* funeral, it must be played as it should be." Not, says he, lookin' at me, "as if it were the 'Last Rose of Summer'. I know you're doing your best, McGrath," says he, "but I couldn't stand it any longer. Take a rest McGrath, give *me* the stick."

"So he took the baton out o' me hand and he stood up on the rostrum. The men looked too dazed to utter a word. "Now—" says he. An' he took *Dead Marchin' Saul*, bar be bar, phrase be phrase, line be line. He got the opening so you could barely hear it. He got a wailing rise where the flutes went up in thirds. He turned the beat of the drum into a sound of doom. He got a grandeur into the brass entry that would make your hair stand up. And he made the trumpets soar so that you'd say there couldn't be such a thing as death ever again in the world.

"When 'twas all over, the tears were runnin' down me face. I felt as if I was mournin' for all the great men the

world ever saw — Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon — it had that effect on me. I was inspired.

“Well,” says he, “ye can do it now. I am satisfied. I think it will be good enough for the funeral on Sunday, Andy,” he says.

“Ah, Mr McCarthy,” says I, wiping me eyes, “You’re not goin’ to have any funeral next Sunday.”

“Don’t you think so?” he said.

“Yeh, no”; says I, “sure we couldn’t do without you anyway.”

‘Do you mean he didn’t die after all?’ I asked as Andy stopped.

‘Die,’ said Andy. ‘Not he — for many a year. And his wife told me that what pulled him out of his weakness after the pneumonia was his interest in *Dead Marchin’ Saul*.’

NEVILLE BRAYBROOKE

Time's Martinet

AT the table the members drowsed. It was summer time; the wide open windows let in the sighs of birches that grew close to the house — touching the heart, stirring the memory of the red-faced diners. They were mostly content to let the speaker drone on. They had been with him from the start, there was no need to listen any more.

As the youngest member of the company I alone could not recall the radiance of Mrs Langtry as she drove her landau through Hyde Park, whilst every man worthy of the name stood on his chair the better to see her pass. The speaker had come to life. He was floundering; his mistakes snatched us from our reveries.

‘... this story shall the old man tell his son and Lancieux’s lancers shall ne’er go by. . . .’ Sir John Grantham was an experienced after dinner speaker. Once in the saddle, his audience knew they had no need to worry, or listen. Now with this sudden break in the expected rhythm, a wind of soberness blew across the table. We were all cars.

‘Lancieux!’ He savoured the word on his palate. It meant nothing to me, nor (it seemed) to anyone else — but we were captivated by the impromptu performance.

‘It was the summer of 1911. I remember the women’s hats were like white sails. We had had some amateur racing round the Breton coast after Cowcs’ week and I took the opportunity of prolonging my summer holiday in France. I had booked the last two weeks at a quaint fourteenth century Abbaye run by nuns.’

There was a noticeable tension in the room. Every man sat forward in expectancy. Sir John caught the suppressed feeling of well mannered mirth. 'Well you can laugh, gentlemen, with your full blooded recollection of the Nun Priest's Tale, but I tell you these French ladies were different — though some of them rare beauties.

'I spoke not a word of French in those days and after a day's whole silence, I thought I would pack my bags and move in somewhere where there were English visitors. Then my luck changed. The afternoon coach from Dinard brought with it a friend of mine, an old friend of the family. We shook hands like explorers on the grey stone steps of the house. All the little black beetles smiled and you'd have thought it was a clandestine meeting from the way were they going on.

'Mrs Carew — for that was the lady's name — was a fine looking woman over whom many had broken their hearts including, I may say, my own brother. She was an early widow, and that to a youngster like myself gave her an added glamour. I was under 25 and I found myself the solitary escort of this charming and beguiling lady.

'After dinner I would fetch her shawl and we would take the air — strolling round the high-walled convent garden that was guarded on its far side by a great wall of sea that came right up to the drooping tamarisks flowering almost at the water's edge. One evening we were down by the sea wall. The tide was coming in and we stared down into the frothy surf that shimmered with the million fins of plantin. "Chippings from the stars," she called them, and as she moved her head the moonlight touched the yellow twist of hair at the nape of her neck and turned it to silver. Tentatively I laid my hand on hers. . . .'

Here the port began once more on its round. Old hands

caressed the crystal neck of the decanter, the evening had changed its tone, there was a glittering of many facets within the grasp of memory.

'It was the rule of the house to shut, bolt and bar both gates and doors at half past ten each evening. A warning bell was sounded at twenty past for those who had wandered out for a last evening stroll. Walking back under the arched trees, I said, "We're in very good time. The bell hasn't even sounded." So we tarried a little longer and I persuaded her to go the long way round by the pond that surrounded the tall emaciated statue of their local saint. Tomorrow it will be different, I thought — fearful of the daylight. I wanted to prolong these last few minutes. I wished there was not the need to separate so early.

'At the door she hesitated, smiling. She too it seemed was not anxious to say farewell. I made to open the door for her and then it was my hands encountered the evening's first opposition. The handle would not turn. I tried again, wrenching it in a half-circle, but the iron knob sprang back and the lock remained fast. At the side of the door was a bell-pull. It could not, I reasoned, be more than quarter to eleven and someone would still be up to let us in. I put up my hand . . .' Sir John paused, his hand slightly raised. "Don't do that." Her command came sharp and sudden. I turned to see the wild clouds of fright that had gathered in her large grey eyes. "You can't," she implored. "It would be disastrous if we were to be found together at this hour. You don't know the conventionalities of the French and these nuns have known me since girlhood."

'Once more I took her cold hands in mine. What she asked seemed reasonable enough and I would have served her beyond reason that night. "Let's go back to the sea

wall," she whispered. "We can talk properly there and decide what to do. We'd better take off our shoes. The gravel makes such a noise and they may be watching from the windows." The trees were ominous and black now the moon had disappeared. Only the lighter texture of the night clouds lit our way back to the water's edge.

'She was shivering violently when we reached the sea wall and I took off my jacket and laid it around her shoulders. "We must find rooms," I said. "We can't sit here all night or you'll catch pneumonia." Huddled on the seat, with her shoes off, she had lost some of her earlier poise. The lines of her body drooped now and, young as I was, I realized that somehow I had reached an uncultivated area of her woman's make up. I put my arm around her and drew her close.

'The tide was on the wane. There was now a thin ribbon of sand between the digue and the sea. "We could just pick our way along," I said, "and then we can get into the village street."

'The village street was in blackness. Not a light glimmered at any upper window. "There's an old mill," she suggested, "that takes visitors in the summer. They may have rooms free." We wound our way out of the main street up a narrow lane boxed in on either side by tall privets. There was a lamp in the window of the *moulin* and Hilary Carew ran the few paces to the front door. "Madam," she called in French, "it is me, Mrs Carew. We are locked out of the Abbaye. Can you receive us?" There was no reply. I could have sworn I saw the shadow of a figure move across the window of the lighted room. But no window opened. She called again and this time brought her thin boned hands against the wooden hardness of the door. "They won't come," she said at last. "Either they

can't or won't hear." We turned back down the lane and once more came to the village street.

'Right at the bottom where the cottages straggled and became barns and pig-sties, where two roads divided round the primitive hump of a Calvary, there was another light. "Who lives there?" I asked, pointing to the cottage whose downstairs was by day a drinking place for fishermen. "I don't know the name," she answered, "but we cannot afford to lose a chance."

'A man came downstairs to our summons. He had been asleep and still wore only his rough cloth shirt. "Madam and I..." I ventured haltingly, "have you accommodation for one night?" He peered closely at us noticing perhaps the glitter of Hilary's diamond bangle. Shrugging his shoulders after he had counted the coins, he led us up the scrubbed wooden stairs to a tiny room at the top of the house and shut the door. In here was a large double bed built like an ark into the wall with heavy curtains and occupying the space of the whole room. There was no other furniture.

'We sat together in blessed relief on the edge of the bed. The cover was crisp and white — made of the flax that the peasants used to spin all through the long winter evenings. The linen beneath was coarse and clean. A mountain of chicken feathers stuffed into a large red cushion rested at the bottom of the bed . . .'

Sir John moistened his lips with his tongue. The company now waited on his every word. No glass chinked.

'You'll be asking yourselves, gentlemen, how this strange tale will end? If I tell you that it has never ended you will not believe me. But there is a sequence which I feel I must add before I let you go.

'In the early morning we stole out of the cottage back

up the village street. The gates of the convent were opened, so Hilary told me, at 5.30 each morning for the nuns to go to mass. We would be able to slip in unobserved and back to our separate rooms.

‘There was no one about in the main hall and we hurried up the waxed polished stairs to our floor. At her door, I turned to take her hand. A black beetle scuttled past us down the passage — muttering, beads-a-jangle, head covered with a lace mantilla that the nuns wore for church. “Did she see us?” Hilary whispered. “Perhaps she was too deep in prayer.” I left her pleased and relieved, and returned to my room. At breakfast there was a slip of paper under each of our plates. Madame la Directrice — I read the finely pointed writing quilled in the blackest ink, Madame la Directrice regrets that she is unable to accommodate the English visitors after twelve noon today. “What does this mean?” Hilary passed me her slip which was the same. “She must have seen us — that old sister — and gone straight to the Directrice before going to church.” We settled our affairs and were ready to leave by the half-past twelve coach. Nobody came to the doors to bid us farewell, but working on the entrance boards with a brush strapped to her foot was the same nun we had seen that morning. As we went past, she looked up, her lips moving in supplication. So she avoided damnation and we were on the way there . . .

‘Now, gentlemen, after your patient attention for so long I ask you to drink a toast. To the Whited Sepulchres, and may you never incur the displeasure of the Blessed.’

‘To the Blessed,’ they incanted.

My glass stuck in my hand. I could not drink the toast. I looked at my father as he sat back. I had recently put down my name for a contemplative order. It happens also to be Hilary.

NORAH BURKE

The Blue Bead

FROM deep water came the crocodile. Out of black water, carved with whirlpools, and into the frill of gold shallows by the stepping stones.

He was twice the length of a tall man; and inside him, among the stones which he had swallowed to aid digestion, rolled a silver bracelet.

Timber was floated down this great Indian river from forests further up, and there were sleepers lying stuck round the stones until someone came to dislodge them and send them on their way, or until floods lifted them and jostled them along.

The crocodile had no need to hide himself. He came to rest in the glassy shallows, among logs, and balanced there on tiptoe on the tippled sand, with only his raised eyes out of water, and raised nostrils breathing the clean sunny air.

Around him broad sparkling water travelled between cliffs and grass and forested hills. A jungle track came out of scrub each side and down to the sun-whitened stepping stones, on which a little flycatcher was flirting and trilling along.

The mugger crocodile, blackish brown above and yellowy white under, lay motionless, able to wait for ever till food came. This antediluvian saurian, this prehistoric juggernaut, ferocious and formidable, a vast force in the water, propelled by the unimaginable and irresistible power of the huge tail, lay lapped by ripples, a throb in his throat. His mouth, running almost the whole length of

his head, was closed and fixed in that evil bony smile, and where the yellow underside came up to it, it was tinged with green.

From the day, perhaps 100 years ago, when the sun had hatched him in a sandbank, and he had broken his shell, and got his head out and looked round, ready to snap at anything before he was even fully hatched — from that day, when he had at once made for the water, ready to fend for himself immediately, he had lived by his brainless craft and ferocity.

Escaping the birds of prey and the great carnivorous fishes that eat baby crocodiles, he had prospered, catching all the food he needed, and storing it till putrid in holes in the bank. Tepid water to live in, and plenty of rotted food, grew him to his great length.

Now, nothing could pierce the inch-thick armoured hide. Not even rifle bullets, which would bounce off. Only the eyes and the soft underarms offered a place. He lived well in the river, sunning himself sometimes with other crocodiles — muggers, as well as the long-snouted fish-eating gharials both — on warm rocks and sandbanks where the sun dried the clay on them quite white, and where they could plop off into the water in a moment if alarmed.

The big crocodile fed mostly on fish, but also on deer and monkeys come to drink, perhaps a duck or two. But sometimes, here at the ford, on a pie-dog full of parasites or a skeleton cow. And sometimes he went down to the burning ghats and found the half-burned bodies of Indians cast into the stream.

Beside him in the shoals, as he lay waiting, glimmered a blue gem.

It was not a gem, though: it was sand-worn glass that

had been rolling about in the river for a long time. By chance, it was perforated right through — the neck of a bottle, perhaps? — a blue bead.

In the shrill noisy village above the ford, out of a mud house the same colour as the ground, came a little girl, a thin, starveling child dressed in an earth-coloured rag. She had torn the rag in two to make skirt and sari.

Sibia was eating the last of her meal, chupatti wrapped round a smear of green chilli and rancid butter; and she divided this also, to make it seem more, and bit it, showing straight white teeth.

With her ebony hair and great eyes, and her skin of oiled brown cream, she was a happy immature child-woman about 12 years old. Barefoot, of course, and often goosey-cold on a winter morning, and born to toil.

In all her life, she had never owned anything but a rag. She had never owned even one anna — not a pice, not a pi, even to buy, say, a handful of blown glass beads from that stall in the bazaar where they were piled like stars, or one of the thin glass bangles that the man kept on a stick, and you could choose which colour you'd have.

She knew what finery was, though. She had been with her parents and brothers all through the jungle to the little town at railhead where there was this bazaar. And she had walked through all the milling people, and the dogs and monkeys full of fleas, the idling, gossiping, bargaining humanity spitting betel juice, heard the bell of a sacred bull clonking as he lumped along through the dust and hubbub.

She had paused, amazed, before the sweetmeat stall, to gaze at the brilliant honey confections, a-buzz with dust and flies. They smelled wonderful, above the smells of drains and humanity and cheap cigarettes. At home she

sometimes tasted wild honey, or crunched the syrup out of a stalk of sugar cane. But these sweets were green and magenta.

Then there was the cloth stall, stacked with great rolls of new cotton cloth, stamped at the edge with the maker's sign of a tiger's head; and smelling so wonderful of its dressing, straight from the mills, that Sibia could have stood by it all day.

But there were other wonders to see: satin sewn with real silver thread, tin trays from Birmingham, and a sari which had got chips of looking-glass embroidered into the border. She joined the crowd round a Kashmiri travelling merchant on his way to the bungalows. He was showing dawn-coloured silks that poured like cream, and he'd got a little locked chest with turquoise and opals in it. Best of all, a box which, when you pressed it, a bell tinkled and a yellow woollen chicken jumped out.

There was no end to the wonders of the world.

But Sibia, in all her life from birth to death, was marked for work. Since she could toddle, she had husked corn, and gathered sticks, and put dung to dry, and cooked and weeded, and carried, and fetched water, and cut grass for fodder.

She was going with her mother and some other women now to get paper-grass from the cliffs above the river. When you had enough of it you could take it down by bullock cart to railhead and sell it to the agent, who would arrange for its dispatch to the paper mills. The women often toiled all day at this work, and the agent sat on silk cushions smoking a hookah.

Such thoughts did not trouble Sibia, however, as she skipped along with her sickle and home-made hayfork

beside her mother. You could skip on the way out, but not on the way back when you ached with tiredness and there was a great load to carry.

Some of the women were wearing necklaces made out of lal-lal-beeges, the shiny scarlet seeds, black one end, that grew everywhere in the jungle — it was best to have new necklaces each year, instead of last year's faded ones — and Sibia was making one too. How nice it was going to be to hear that rattling swish round her neck as she froushed along with lots of necklaces. But each seed, hard as stone, had to be drilled with a red-hot needle, and the family needle was snapped, so she must wait till they could buy another.

Oh for strings and strings of glass and beads — anklets, earrings, nose-rings, bangles — all the gorgeous dazzle of the bazaar — all her little golden body decorated!

Chattering as they went, the women followed the dusty track towards the river. On their way they passed a Gujar encampment of grass huts where these nomadic graziers would live for a time until their animals had perhaps finished all the easy grazing within reach, or they were not able to sell enough of their white butter and white milk in the district, or there was no one to buy the young male buffaloes for tiger-bait. Or perhaps a cattle-killing tiger was making a nuisance of himself. Then they'd move on.

Sibia glanced at the Gujar women as she went past. They wore trousers, tight and wrinkled at the ankles, and in their ears large silver rings made out of melted rupees; and one of them was clinking a stick against the big brass gurrachs in which they fetched water from the river for the camp, to see which ones were empty. The men and boys were out of camp just now with the herd or gone to the

bazaar to sell produce, but one or two buffaloes were standing about, creatures with great wet noses and moving jaws and gaunt black bones.

The Gujars were junglis as Sibia was too, born and bred in the forest. For countless centuries, their forebears had lived like this, getting their living from animals, from grass and trees, as they scratched their food together, and stored their substance in large herds and silver jewellery. They were Man in the wandering Pastoral Age, not Stone Age hunters, and not yet Cultivators.

Ah, now there was the river, twinkling between the trees, sunlit beyond dark trunks. They could hear it rushing along.

The women came out on the shore, and made for the stepping stones.

They had plenty to laugh and bicker about, as they approached the river in a noisy crowd. They girded up their skirts, so as to jump from stone to stone, and they clanked their sickles and forks together over their shoulders to have ease of movement. They shouted their quarrels above the gush of the river.

Noise frightens crocodiles. The big mugger did not move, and all the women crossed in safety to the other bank.

Here they had to climb stiff hillsides to get at the grass, but all fell to with a will, and sliced away at it wherever there was foothold to be had.

Down below them ran the broad river, pouring powerfully out from its deep narrow pools among the cold cliffs and shadows, spreading into warm shallows, lit by kingfishers. Great turtles lived there, and mahseer weighing more than a hundred pounds. Crocodiles too. Sometimes you could see them lying out on those slabs of clay over

there, but there were none to be seen at the moment.

Where Sibia was working, wind coming across hundreds of miles of trees cooled her sweating body, and she could look down over the river as if she were a bird. Although she did not dare stop for a moment under her mother's eye, her imagination took her in swooping flight over the bright water and golden air to the banks where she had played as a child.

In those cavelets above the high water mark of the highest flood she had stored some little bowls moulded of clay while they hardened. If there were anything that could be used for colouring, they would look fine painted with marigolds and elephants.

'Child!'

The sharp word — the glare of her mother's angry sweating face, pulled Sibia back to work, and they toiled on.

But at last it was time to go back to see to their animals and the evening meal. The loaded women set out to cross the river again.

Sibia hung back. She would just dawdle a bit and run and see if the little clay cups were still there in the cave, waiting to be painted and used.

Although the women were now tired and loaded, they still talked. Those in front yelled to those behind. They crossed the river safely and disappeared up the track into the trees the other side. Even their voices died away.

Silence fell.

Sibia came down alone to the stepping stones.

The light of evening was striking up the gorge, pink into the ultra-violet shadows. Now that the sun was off it, the water poured almost invisible among the stones with no reflection to show where it began.

Sibia stepped on to the first stone.

She was heavily weighted, her muscles stretched and aching. The hayfork squeaked in the packed dry grass and dug into her collar-bone so close under the skin, in spite of the sari bunched up to make a pad.

When she was halfway over she put her load down on a big boulder to rest; and leant, breathing, on the fork.

At the same moment a Gujar woman came down with two gurrahs to the water on the other side. In order to get the good clear water which would quickly fill both gurrahs to the top without sand, she walked on to the stepping-stones.

She was within a yard of the crocodile when he lunged at her.

Up out of the darkling water heaved the great reptile, water slushing off him, his livid jaws yawning and all his teeth flashing as he slashed at her leg.

The woman screamed, dropped both brass pots with a clatter on the boulder, from whence they bounced to the water and Sibia saw them bob away in the current. *Oh, the two good vessels gone—*

The Gujar woman recoiled from the crocodile, but his jaws closed on her leg at the same moment as she slipped and fell on the bone-breaking stone and clutched one of the timber logs to save herself.

The log jammed between two boulders, with the woman clinging to it and screaming, while the crocodile pulled on her leg, threshing his mighty tail — bang! — bang! — to and fro in great smacking flails as he tried to drag her free and carry her off down into the deeps of the pool. Blood spread everywhere.

Sibia sprang.

From boulder to boulder she came leaping like a rock goat. Sometimes it had seemed difficult to cross these stones, especially the big gap in the middle where the river coursed through like a bulge of glass. But now she came on wings, choosing her footing in mid-air without even thinking about it, and in one moment she was beside the shrieking woman.

In the boiling bloody water, the face of the crocodile, fastened round her leg, was tugging to and fro, and smiling.

His eyes rolled round on to Sibia. One slap of the tail could kill her.

He struck. Up shot the water, twenty feet, and fell like a silver chain. Again!

The rock jumped under the blow.

But in the daily heroism of the jungle, as common as a thorn tree, Sibia did not hesitate.

She aimed at the reptile's eyes.

With all the force of her little body she drove the hay-fork at the eyes, and one prong went in — right in — while its pair scratched past on the horny cheek.

The crocodile reared up in convulsion, till half his lizard body was out of the river, the tail and nose nearly meeting over his stony back. Then he crashed back, exploding the water, and in an uproar of bloody foam he disappeared.

He would die. Not yet, but presently, though his death would not be known for days; not till his stomach, blown with gas, floated him. Then perhaps he would be found upside down among the logs at the timber boom.

Sibia got her arms round the fainting woman and somehow dragged her from the water. She stopped her wounds with sand, and bound them with rag, and helped her home to the Gujar encampment where the men made a litter to

carry her to someone for treatment.

Then Sibia went back for her grass and sickle and fork.

The fork was lying in the river, not carried away, luckily, and as she bent to pick it up out of the water she saw the blue bead. Not blue now, with the sun nearly gone, but a no-colour white-blue, and its shape wobbling in the movement of the stream. She reached her arm down into a yard of the cold silk water to get it. Missing it first of all.

Then there it lay in her wet palm, perfect, even pierced ready for use, with the sunset shuffled about inside it like gold-dust. All her heart went up in flames of joy.

After a bit she twisted it into the top of her skirt against her tummy, so that she would know if it burst through the poor cloth and fell.

Then she picked up her fork and sickle and the heavy grass and set off home. Ai! Ai! What a day!

Her bare feet smudged out the wriggle-mark of snakes in the dust; there was the thin singing of malaria mosquitoes among the trees now; and this track was much used at night by a morose old makna elephant — the Tuskless One; but Sibia was not thinking of any of them. The stars came out: she did not notice.

On the way back she met her mother, come to look for her, and scolding.

'I did not see till I was home, that you were not there. I thought something must have happened to you.'

And Sibia, bursting with her story, cried, 'Something *did!* I found a blue bead for my necklace, look!'

L. C. CHRISTIE

The Unforeseen

NO one was surprised when Geoffrey Toyne married Madeleine Sanders; but their later acquaintance wondered why he had. She had kept a mild voluptuousness and was usually decorative without being particularly smart. She had also kept her childish habit of putting herself and everyone else into categories, 'Speaking as a child-lover' she would say, or 'men all adore oysters.' Micky Cox maintained that, speaking as an echo, she would produce in the evening a reversed version of anything Geoffrey happened to have said at breakfast. Geoffrey had given up remonstrating with her for broadcasting his travestied opinions; she would never admit they were travestied. He had ceased to correct her, either directly or by implication; deciding, it was supposed, that her remarks were self-contradictory. Madeleine took his silence for approval. She would sit on the heart-rug and gaze wide-eyed at Geoffrey and ask him to tell her all about his latest case; and just when he was launched on his description, she would say sweetly, 'Darling I do like that tie.' When he accused her of lack of real interest in what he said, she would be hurt and exclaim, 'But I care passionately for everything that concerns you, that's why I noticed the tie.' And if he refused to be mollified she sometimes added petulantly, 'You're always talking about timing things, as if personal relationship was like boiling an egg.'

Geoffrey's mind was growing in range and power with use. He took silk young and went ahead at the bar,

intending when he had made enough money to go into politics.

Sally Cox, because she was fond of them both, tried to interest Madeleine in politics; but Madeleine said that reading debates was like eating sawdust, and how could it be important when everyone knew that those tiresome civil servants really ran the country. So Sally coaxed her to concerts and picture-galleries but Madeleine said they took up too much time, a wife's first duty was to her home,' 'and darling I hate viewy people, don't you? They're all so dowdy. Let's go to Adèle's and see if she has any new hats.' Being brusque or even mildly astringent was as hopeless as trying to make an impression in cotton-wool; but just when Sally was at the point of exasperation, Madeleine would show such confiding affection that she was once more beguiled.

Geoffrey saw the widening rift between himself and Madeleine clearly enough: but she accepted his polite interest in her ploys as if it had been an enthusiasm, and first was aware of the chasm one Sunday at Bassett. She had altered the lighting of their cottage sitting-room, and installed old oil lamps with silk shades and electric bulbs inside the lamp-chimneys 'Looks bogus to me,' Geoffrey said.

'Oh dear, you always prefer old-fashioned things, and I've been told so many people what fun it was that we had our taste for furnishing and arranging rooms in common.'

'Well we don't appear to have that in common now, nor anything else; it's time this sham ended.'

He looked so fierce that she thought for a moment he was going to smash her new lamps.

'You can stay here as long as you like. I'm going back to London.'

'Geoffrey, don't take a little thing so seriously. Though as a home-lover, I think they look awfully cosy. Oh I suppose it's some tiresome case you must get back to, even though it's Sunday. Well, let's make the most of our time; you must have an egg to your tea before your drive.'

Geoffrey didn't dislike her enough to enjoy being brutal. But he knew how quickly she rebuilt her world of illusion if unpleasant reality touched it; and that he might break away finally now, if he was ruthless.

Madeleine never remembered very clearly what they had said, or when he went; only that she spent the rest of the night wandering about the cottage, picking things up and putting them down again; till in the dawn she felt exhausted and made a cup of tea.

As early as was at all decent she telephoned to Sally and begged her to come. Sally was thoroughly frightened by the dreary way she said, 'I feel quite lost,' and drove down to Bassett as soon as she had swallowed some breakfast; to find Madeleine sound asleep on a rug under an apple tree. She wanted her to come back to London and see Geoffrey and get things sorted out, but Madeleine shook her head. She did not want Sally to discuss things with him either; she dreaded that their parting might be made irrevocable.

'Well you'll have to come and collect your belongings, my dear; and if you'd rather not see Geoffrey, stay with us and pack when he's in court. I can let him know beforehand.'

She shook her head again. 'Darling you'll do it for me I know. I expect as a sensible person you think me silly. I couldn't go back to number 25,' and in almost a whisper. 'I was too happy there.' She seemed to accept it as her fate to stay at Bassett.

Sally gradually made out from Madeleine's half statements and evasions that Geoffrey would always be welcome; that she had enough money of her own to live on, and would not touch a penny of Geoffrey's while she did not live with him and run his house for him; but that he could pay for the very best of everything for Gerda.

'Gerda,' thought Sally 'good gracious we don't seem to have concerned ourselves about her at all'.

'I think Gerda will be all right,' Madeleine was saying. 'She's devoted to Geoffrey, and I think she's fond of me' (Yesterday she would have been sure of Gerda's devotion to herself or taken it for granted and said nothing about it thought Sally) 'but she's always been entirely self-reliant, and known her own mind.'

Geoffrey was surprised by Madeleine's dignity. She wrote, not quite often enough for him to condemn her for bothering him regularly; and he had to admit to himself that her sparser letters were less boring than when they were full of endearments. Her letters about Gerda were remarkably sensible. He wondered now and then why she was sensible only about Gerda, and had not yet found out that the ideas he approved of were mainly Gerda's own. When she was with him, Gerda usually talked about his interests. Most companionable, he called her, and he would have scouted the suggestion that she cared more for Madeleine. He saw that Gerda was slim and young and gay, but not that her strongest instinct was protective, nor that Madeleine satisfied this instinct, by needing to be looked after more than anyone Gerda knew.

Though she saw him more than once each school holidays, Gerda often suggested his coming to Bassett, to see her new pony, or to teach her, when she turned 17, to drive the car. But Geoffrey kept away, hoping that if he did

Madeleine might divorce him for desertion. Not that he wanted to marry again. He had come to the melancholy conclusion that the same kind of character goes on making the same kind of mistake; and his pride perversely maintained that his marriage had been entirely his own mistake.'

Madeleine had no intention of doing anything drastic. She told Micky Cox that she did not disapprove of divorce, but that she did not feel she would ever want to divorce Geoffrey.

Micky drove home crossly. He had spoilt a perfect lazy week-end wondering how to approach the subject tactfully, and had come away with an answer that would annoy Geoffrey. Geoffrey he was sure would prefer a definite no, or a religious scruple, to this evasive refusal. 'It's the common fate of a go-between to please neither side,' he thought. Geoffrey could manage his own affairs another time.

Sally unaware of Micky's mission told Geoffrey that she was happier about Madeleine than she had been for ages; and that all these flint implements they were digging up in the garden were such fun.

Madeleine and an interest in flint heads seemed so incongruous that Geoffrey at once suspected a too charming Vicar, only he knew perfectly well that Mr Jones was nearly 70 and cared for nothing except the book he was writing on some long forgotten heresy; and Doctor Magin was a cheerful rider to hounds. There must be some one new, a retired Major or a don with a reading-party. He could not ask directly, he read Madeleine's letters with a new care and remained baffled and curious.

The next time Gerda stayed with him, he asked if there were any new neighbours. Much the nicest, he was told.

was an archeologist called Florence Hopwood, who had taken the Old Rectory; 'Come down and meet her, I know you'd like her. She lives there with her brother. We don't see nearly as much of him. He's dull compared to her.'

Childish innocence thought Geoffrey, working himself into a fine mixed state of moral indignation and dog-in-the-mangerish jealousy. He stood it for a week he told himself. (In fact he had been too busy to think about Madeleine's behaviour except in snatches.) Then on Saturday he drove down to Bassett. It was dark when he arrived. He left the car in the lane and went in through the garden. He had no plan. He stood in the passage leaning against the coats that hung there wondering what to do. The sentences which had jangled in his head as he drove were too silly and stagey to use. The sitting-room door, half open, threw a splash of light across the passage, ten feet away; and he could hear Gerda talking in there, but he wasn't sure who else. Someone was in the kitchen, Madeleine he supposed, making the tea. He thought he would wait till she was in the sitting-room to announce himself. He did not want to startle her there in the passage. But as she came out of the kitchen she caught her toe in the often remembered, never properly tacked down, corner of the matting; stumbled, and splashed boiling water on his ankles.

He seized her shoulders and shook her, 'My God do you never look what you're doing?'

She screamed and screamed. He felt for her throat, and then went cold all over, pushed her from him and ran.

He had not turned the car when he got out, so he drove straight on over the hill and south for ten miles or so before he took a London road. The police rushing to

Bassett from the north, met only known and innocent cars.

He looked so white and ill at breakfast on Monday that his house-keeper so far forgot herself as to suggest that he might like her to ring up the doctor. Geoffrey ignored the suggestion and sent her to see if the *Times* had come. There was he supposed plenty of news, but nothing of Bassett or Madeleine. He bought each edition of the evening papers as they came out, with the same result.

He had often heard people say that suspense was killing them, but it seemed to wear off the fine edge of his apprehension. His speech to the Jury on Friday won a ticklish case, and was said to be the best thing he had done.

He went home to change before dining out, and found the letter on the hall table.

I half expected to hear from you,' Madeleine wrote, 'but perhaps it didn't get into the London papers. Actually I had a narrow escape; and I've been quite ill from shock. The burglar was hiding in the passage, and went for me when I took the kettle in. He ran away when the others came. The police don't seem able to catch him, because he hadn't time to take anything. I'm sure you know lots of Judges and people who could stir them up.'

J. J. CURLE

The Heart's Addition

IT had been understood from the first that Eve should be 'Miss Eve' and the senora Fernandez 'Mrs Fernandez'. Eve found the arrangement typically Spanish, formal with a politeness that hovered always on the edge of condescension. She did not know whether she liked it or not, but then Mrs Fernandez had arranged it.

As Eve stood before her employer now she could see in her only Juan's wife. The older woman looked at her strangely: to Eve she seemed old though she was barely fifty.

'We have something to discuss,' she said.

'Shall I bring out a chair?' asked Eve.

'Sit here beside me; there is plenty of room.'

Eve sat down at the far end of the bench.

'How long have you been with us?' said the older woman.

'Three years. You remember it was autumn when I came. Pepito was ten.'

'Yes, I remember.' The phrase as she said it sounded disconcerting. Her next words left no room for doubt. 'Why have you stayed with us so long?'

Eve did not possess the gift of lying easily, but she knew she must lie now. How could she say it — I stayed here because—? No, it was unthinkable; she could not think it even to herself for the thought would make her feel guilty and she was not guilty — would not give Mrs Fernandez the triumph of seeing her confused.

The older woman did not wait for an answer. Perhaps thought Eve, surprised, she too dreaded it. For a moment that made her seem quite human, but when she spoke she was at once the same as always. 'You have been very faithful to us.' The dry voice seemed even dryer than usual as it repeated, 'very faithful.'

'It has been—' began Eve, and while she hunted for a word the voice caught her up, finishing the phrase—

'—a pleasure? Hardly, I think. The children had been badly spoiled before you took them over and I have not been the friend you hoped.' Then, as Eve raised her head to reply, she added, 'You need not deny it. I know what I do and why I do it.' You may not realize it but I selected you for this post from a considerable number of applicants. I selected you for a purpose. Now it is time to see if I chose right.'

'Come closer, child,' the voice said and suddenly it was different, warmer, more intimate.

Eve moved closer. She still did not understand.

'They tell me I have only three months to live' said Mrs Fernandez. 'Now it is definite. At the time when I brought you here they knew it would happen but they did not know exactly when.' The voice had a touch, but only a touch, of its former dryness as she added, 'three months is not a very long time.'

Eve was trembling. The trembling was love, horror at herself, unspeakable joy, pity — deepest of all, guilt.

'What can I do?' she said. She did not know precisely what she meant by the words but she felt impelled to say them. Somehow she must make expiation for having thought as she had of Juan, this woman's husband. Without expiation she could not live with her thoughts of herself.

'You can do everything,' answered Mrs Fernandez, 'everything.'

So that was it, Eve realized. It was for that she had been selected as governess and brought to the house. She felt so angry, so ashamed she could not speak. She could hardly breathe. Her ears roared, the blood spread its burning stain across her face, down her neck, down, down. She felt as though it had been poured over her naked body so that she stood fouled in it from head to foot.

She tried to rise from the bench but a hand held her, a cool impersonal hand that would not let go. Its strength calmed her. Why should she run away? She had nothing to be ashamed of. It was this woman, this creature, she thought. But the momentary anger ebbed leaving her only with the desire to cry, not for herself but for all that she had imagined and that was now spoiled.

She fought back the tears, would not let them fall, and as her sight cleared found Mrs Fernandez looking at her. There was compassion in the older woman's eyes, a compassion Eve would not accept.

'He does not know. He will never know,' said Mrs Fernandez.

'But I know,' said Eve. 'How could I ever—'. She would not finish, would not allow herself to argue. That was to admit that the situation was still tolerable.

'Juan loves you,' said Mrs Fernandez. 'He thinks I have treated you badly. He is a man of honour; you are a member of his household, young, helpless. When a man has to admire the courage of a woman whose misfortunes seem to him undeserved, it is no great step for him to love her.'

Eve felt it was her right to be outraged, to pour bitter, furious words on her enemy. But how could she speak; the

woman was dying? What she had done was unforgivable, disastrous, but not evil. There was something noble in it like the intervention of a God in man's affairs bringing love and death together to mortals.

'I must go and pack,' said Eve. 'If you will let Pedro take me down to the station—'

But the older woman's hand held her still. 'Don't go,' said the old voice, 'don't go.' And then Mrs Fernandez was kneeling to her. The effect was so shocking that it penetrated Eve's last shield of self-pity. It stopped her efforts to get away; she even put out a hand to help Mrs Fernandez rise. This was something, she knew, that had never happened before, something she should never have seen whatever Mrs Fernandez had done to her.

'It doesn't matter,' she said. She couldn't put it any clearer.

'But it does matter. What else matters?' cried Mrs Fernandez. She was on her feet now. She leant over as if to shake Eve. 'What right have you to any sort of pride except that he loves you? That matters; nothing else.'

'I must go,' Eve repeated, but she let her arm rest in the other woman's grasp without attempting to pull it away.

Mrs Fernandez was panting: the exertion had been almost too much for her. She paused, fighting to get her breath and Eve sat beside her without stirring.

'We must talk,' said Mrs Fernandez at last. 'It is time we were honest. I am Juan's first wife. I am dying. You will be his second. The rest is only play-acting. We have no time for that; we have got to understand one another. If I were going to live I should not have brought you here; you would probably leave were I not going to die.'

'You meant to buy me,' said Eve.

'Why not,' said Mrs Fernandez, 'it was for him.'

Eve knew there must be an answer but none came. For three years she had been borne with, tested, trained as a rival, and in three months the woman who had chosen her would be dead. The rest was only convention; the denials, the righteous anger, all that one was supposed to feel. She knew now that she would stay, so why pretend? She could be as direct as Mrs Fernandez. 'If he asks me I shall marry him,' she said.

'My poor child, he will not ask you,' replied Mrs Fernandez. It was like a blow in the face. 'Once, perhaps,' she went on, 'but not now; that was why I had to speak to you.'

Eve knew then that it was all over and knew in the same moment that she had no pride left, that she did not care about pride, that no humiliation would have been too deep if she might have loved Juan, but she knew that no other kind of love would be possible.

'What will happen to him?' she said.

'Yes,' said Mrs Fernandez, answering her own unspoken question, 'you put him first, you know your pride is only in him. I can tell you what will happen. He will not ask you because once long ago I put him so deeply in my debt that he promised never to marry again. I did not ask him to do it: he did it for me.' Her voice should have been warm but it was not. 'It happened five years after we were married,' she went on. 'He fell in love with my best friend. She was not then married. I was very understanding: we talked it over quite frankly between the two of us. We decided that my friend must never know. We both suffered and our suffering drew us closer together, but it was no less painful because we shared it. Perhaps it was worse, because each of us bore it for both. My

husband was grateful because I did not reproach him. Sometimes I wish I had done. Gratitude is a terrible burden, and to feel that you are loved through gratitude—'

'You did not mean it as an obligation,' said Eve.

'That is what I have spent twenty years trying to decide. I may have done wrong. I feel I must repay him—'

'—With me?' Eve spoke without bitterness.

'Yes.'

'You couldn't let things just happen on their own?'

'No. You will say I have only made the same mistake all over again. You are quite right. We do not even learn to make a different kind of mistake. Our natures do not change neither do we. Our actions seem different; their causes are always the same.'

'But if he was happy with you? Did it matter?'

'He saw what happened: we both saw. She married a fool. He was a fool about money, about drink, about women. He had a little moustache: he sang well to the guitar. It took him ten years to kill her and another eight to kill himself. It all happened here in the valley.'

'And Juan never said anything.' Eve was not asking a question.

Mrs Fernandez merely echoed her, 'Never, anything.'

'And you still have to pay — more than that?'

'Nothing will ever be enough. You know why I have told you this?' she continued, 'it is because the hardest thing has still to be said. This time you must know, you must make your choice. She never knew. If you are to have him I must give him to you, I must absolve him from his debt, and you must know that he comes to you only because I absolve him. If I do not free him, his respect for me will be greater than his love for you. Can you take

him and not be changed by knowing that? He must never be told. You must bear the burden this time.'

Eve looked at her, saw the wrinkled face, the tired body. Remembering Juan, still handsome, she knew who had suffered and why. Sorrow had passed over him like a cloud leaving no shadow and this guilt, this imagined guilt, born of love, had scraped like a harrow over the flesh and the spirit of his wife. 'I love him too,' she said. 'I shall pray to be to him as you have been.'

Mrs Fernandez sighed as though eased of a great burden. 'I think I shall go in now, Donna Eve,' she said. 'There is no more I need to explain. We understand each other.' She smiled. 'Now I must speak to Juan; I have to prepare his mind for a new idea.' Eve could never decide if she was still smiling as she added, 'an idea he will not be unwilling to receive.'

JOHN A. DENTON

Replacement

THE bishop reached out for the cigarette case that Julian Holt held out to him. He was a small, round, energetic man, and his ruddy face reflected practical good nature. Julian, much taller, dark, flicked his lighter. The bishop inhaled, sighed. 'My dear Julian,' he said. 'Man is separated from the animals because he alone has a soul. It is the soul that we trust.' He stopped, grinned, his fine dark eyes twinkling. 'Why did you destroy Jon?' 'Because of the soul.' Julian waved the case in a gesture of resignation. 'Some things must be. Also, of course, because I had made enough money.'

'I suppose you had,' said the bishop. 'And, talking of money, thank you for your contribution to the boys' fund.'

'It was nothing. You are going to have a lot of influence over the next generation.'

'I shall do what I can.' For a moment the bishop looked older, then the face creased again into laughter lines. 'I used to enjoy your show.'

Julian smiled reminiscently. 'It was amusing; but we all grow older.'

'Funny,' said the bishop. 'I thought you would never give it up.'

Julian shrugged. 'I got older. I am happy here. This is my home. An honourable retirement.' He paused, his head cocked on one side. 'I think I heard the door bell. Will you excuse me? The servants are out.'

'Of course,' said the bishop. He had heard the faint whisper of the bell, wondered idly who it might be. He

sat for a moment after Julian went out, smoking quietly. The old room, unchanged from a more peaceful generation, was soothing. He began to think about Julian Holt, remembering vivid scenes, hearing in his mind old arguments.

The first Jon. A thin, wavering, caricature of a man, with a wax face and a microphone voice. He remembered with some of the old shock, Julian's vehemence. 'I can build a robot!' Jon turning his shuddering neck to tell the time, and Julian saying, 'It's easy to build a robot, but he won't be as strong as a man.' That was true, a visitor had broken the second Jon's arm by shaking his hand. Then Julian had quarrelled with his family, borrowed money from an Uncle, and begun the first 'Holt's Robot Troup.'

Julian had a genius for mechanical construction. There was nothing original about the robots, except the blending of balance and power into the similitude of human action. 'Betty Mae,' a hip wagging, deep voiced, charmer, had muscles worked with compressed air. 'Johnson,' a lanky farm boy who started the act in a stalls end seat, was magnetic, and had barely enough power to get on to the stage. The act was funny. Julian himself, with his poise and showmanship, contrasted the jerk of his dolls. Of course they forgot their lines, and disobeyed him; he found that got the audience. The idea of a robot ad libbing was delectable. When Johnson made a pass and Daisy Mae's skirt ripped, they rolled in the aisles; and when he said with a strong back woods drawl, 'Heck. She ain't human,' and went after one of the chorus girls, there was danger of apoplexy. The act was chaotic, but it always ended the same way. Julian picked up Johnson and Daisy Mae and said: 'You see. They aren't as strong as you or I. We'll control them.'

It gave them something to think about.

The bishop stubbed out his cigarette. There was a gentle murmur of voices from the hall. A woman's voice.

Of course the robots got better. There was Debra. She smiled, just like a child, and she danced. People didn't believe she was a robot until Julian opened her front and showed the works. That was all she could do, of course, smile and dance. They could keep going longer too, but they never got much stronger. Julian had a taciturn doll in New York that shadowed him like a detective. He introduced all the press to it before they caught on to its being a robot. And that was how he met Kenneth Donnely.

Donnely was an American, big, earnest, and vital. The bishop remembered the shock of his sudden death. Donnely had given the dolls brains. The bishop remembered going to the first show of the new troupe. Julian came on to the stage as immaculate as ever, promised them the surprise of the century. He introduced a small clownish figure, a jerky mechanical man. 'Clarence, here, is going to show you just how a robot works.' Clarence smiled a jerky smile, went over to Julian and opened his front, and Julian was a robot. The real Julian came on from the other side in the shock of silence that followed.

This was a different act. The robots were smart. Clarence could work problems faster than the best professors or accountants. The robot Julian could play the piano at sight; you brought your own music. The act had been good, and it had changed, just as if the robots had been specially talented performers.

Julian came back apologetically. 'Sorry to have been so long. Miss Georgia Hanson called. I'm doing some organisation for her.'

The bishop nodded. He was still thinking about the

robots. 'Did Donnelly leave any information about the calculators?'

For a moment Julian looked blank, then he grinned. 'You mean the brains?'

'Yes,' the bishop looked rather doubtful. 'I suppose I do. It's just a prejudice. I'd rather call them calculators.'

'Call them what you like,' said Julian amiably. 'No. He didn't. Matter of fact he scared himself with them.'

'Oh?' The bishop looked interested.

Julian nodded. 'They were arguing with him.'

'What?' The bishop sat up stiffly with surprise.

'Fact. They started arguing about evolution. What scared him was the fact that they convinced him. That's why he stopped the laboratory experiments.'

'You don't mean it.' The bishop frowned severely at Julian. 'Nobody has built a calculating machine that has ideas. That is preposterous.'

'Sure,' agreed Julian. 'That's why Donnelly called them brains.' He laughed at the bishop's worried look. 'It's simple enough the way he explained it to me. All you do is get a substance complex enough to react to electrical wave patterns, and that could reproduce the patterns when given a small electrical power source. When he thought he had it, he hooked it up to some little gadgets that turned sense stimuli into wave patterns, and waited. It thought.'

'How incredible!' The bishop looked horrified. 'But such a machine would not be subject to the limitations of a calculating machine. It would be capable of abstraction. Or, would it?'

'After it got a memory.'

'And he succeeded in making a memory?'

'Not exactly. Memory turned out to be implicit in the substance. It settled into complexities as the waves went

through it. But Donnely did make one mistake about the substance.'

'What was that?'

'He was under the impression that he had actuated the whole brain. Actually, what he had done was to drive channels through it. When the internal, call it cerebation, began to activate the main part of the brain, then Donnely got his arguments.' Julian smiled reminiscently. 'He was a social scientist really. He intended to use the brains to give him some insight into the workings of the human mind.'

The bishop still looked perturbed. 'But, why didn't he publish the results of his experiments?'

'Easy. He was scared. How would you feel? He invented a brain to poke around in so he could tell what went on in a man's head, and after a while it was poking around, and telling him what went on inside him. He was scared.'

The bishop pulled out a handkerchief and mopped at his forehead, but he had to go on. 'I can understand that. But surely, such a machine would be of inestimable use in solving the problems of humanity?'

'Would it?' Julian looked at the bishop curiously. 'Of course, it could solve the problems, but would humanity be pleased?'

'I don't think I understand.'

'Well. Take the brain's idea about evolution. Man rules the earth because he has a superior intelligence. Intelligence has become the deciding factor in survival. Man will be replaced, only when a more intelligent being has been bred.'

'Yes,' said the bishop. 'I am familiar with the argument.'

'He was talking to a superior intelligence.'

'What?' The bishop mopped his brow again. 'Really,

I don't know whether you are serious or not. In any case the superiority seems to have been ineffective.'

Julian shrugged. 'I present the argument for what it is worth.' He got out his cigarette case, held it out to the bishop. 'I think you are entitled to an explanation, and a last cigarette.'

The bishop pressed down on the arms of his chair, made no attempt to take the cigarette. His face was white. 'A . . . last cigarette?'

Julian nodded. He turned to the door. 'Come in dear.'

The door opened and two people came in. The bishop had no difficulty in recognising them. 'Miss Hanson,' said Julian. He smiled. 'I think you know the other.'

Miss Hanson sat on the arm of Julian's chair. She was beautiful. She looked curiously and a little sadly at the bishop. The bishop clutched moaning at his collar, then with a little whimper, he collapsed. The man who had followed Georgia Hanson into the room looked put out. 'Dear, dear,' he murmured, 'I do hope the poor fellow is in no pain.' He stood, a small round man, concern on his ruddy face. His voice, like his body, was a perfect replica of the bishop's.

'He's dead,' said the woman, 'I can tell.'

An hour or so later they sat round the table, Julian, Georgia, and the one that was now the bishop. They were mainly listening to the bishop who was in great form.

'As usual,' said Julian, 'The body will present no difficulty. I consider it the finest form of insurance to walk away from the scene of the crime accompanied by the victim.'

'There are so many of them,' said Georgia.

'One more unidentified man, dead from natural causes.' The bishop paused and twinkled at them. 'I shall have to

write a treatise on the subject of murder. Can one commit murder on a being of a different species, or is murder just the crime of killing a man?

‘You will have to define man then,’ suggested Julian.

‘None of your evolutionary scales for me,’ said the bishop sternly. ‘Man is distinguished from the animals because he has a soul. What are you thinking of, Georgia?’

‘I like men.’ She turned to Julian. ‘We shall keep some, shan’t we Julian?’

ISOBEL ENGLISH

The Crucifix After Cellini

IN what dark country did she find herself now? The gloom inside the church was so heavy as to be felt; it hung in great folds about her as she knelt in front of the altar. The black stiffened bow on the woman's hat at her side confused and distressed her; it suggested a Maltese Cross, a denigration of the truth. A man's voice from the back of the church made light of the responses.

Caroline cast her mind back to let in the light, for it seemed no light could come from without. The priest's movements were respectful but inaccurate. A little of the cold water trickled down her neck as the stain of original sin was conditionally erased.

('When we get married,' Sebastian had said, 'it will be a day of lightness and rejoicing. We'll have the altar massed with narcissus, and great golden bursts of Palestrina from the organ.') But to think back to those times now was as painfully difficult as the excavation of a buried city that had been laid waste after terrible defeat. . . .

'Sebastian is all I have got.' The first time he had taken her to the flat, his mother had bounced these words lightly over the rim of a tea cup. She had been 21 with all the heavy brooding of prolonged adolescence. Later with a boldness that she would have described as straightforward, she had remarked: 'Your mother seems dreadfully possessive.' She had not then known of her own cannibalistic streak: the desire to kill, dissect and devour. The necessary prerogative of the hunting woman was as yet a

mystery hidden beneath the surface of restricted decencies that lead from church to grave.

The passion for post-mortem was still young in her. As a stumbling infant that can only measure its strength by the violence of its falls, so she staggered about in a territory where the older and more worldly might fear to tread.

They had gone forward together in partnership (a joint interest in the bookshop); yet in a sense it was she who followed doggedly after his frail willowy figure, basked in the radiance of his self-obsessive projects, dubbed herself lieutenant so that she might further partake in the activities of his mind. 'I want to run my own theatre, write my own plays and act in them.' Sebastian at 23 was as indefatigable as only the inexperienced can be. A sinuous Catholicism — an attitude of mind that set him on bartering terms with his God — made up for what his sensibilities and temperament lacked: 'I have made terms with those of the next world. I have said: "If you do this: I will do that; and in all cases there have been answers." ' Caroline, in her own lack of faith, marvelled: 'If I could only believe as he does, we might draw close together, there would not be this gulf of uncertainty between us.' She could not pray in the sense of invoking any particular spiritual aid, but she made strange movements of the soul; like a fish she floundered over dry land towards the Holy Sea.

One day they had sat together in his room until late in the afternoon; locked together in the sad embrace of youth that does not sense the extent of each other's suffering or indifference. Five o'clock had struck on his French ormolu clock, followed by the few tender bars of a Mozart gavotte that synchronized with the striking of each hour. The door had burst open suddenly and they

had sprung apart as his mother towered in the empty space. 'Five o'clock,' she had said coldly regarding the untidy state of Caroline's hair and the hem of her blouse that hung limply over the outside of her skirt, 'I like my son to have his tea at the proper time.' All the piled up resentment against tiny shafts that had hardly broken the surface of the flesh and drawn blood from only the finest capillary veins, united into a great and wounding hurt. 'I should like you to know that I have as much interest as you in this man, since I am going to marry him,' she had said. Sebastian had moved to the window to escape their blows. His turn would come, but to begin with he could, by presenting them with his back, stave off the more savage attacks from either of them.

'Is this true? This cannot be true' The anguish in the mother's voice caused him to turn immediately. He hesitated for less than a second, but the hesitation was too long for Caroline: 'Tell her, Sebastian,' she said, still confident of his support, 'tell her that we are going to be married.' He had looked at them both, as they waited for him to speak. His mother had her head held high in grim stoicism, while Caroline her lips now quivering, a thin mist of tears spreading over the inside of her glasses, had supported the sides of her head with both hands. 'Well, yes,' he had said quietly with all the severity that he could muster in his high young voice, 'I have told her I would marry her.'

Then she had been in his arms: clutching at the stuff of his waistcoat, tearing at his very heart. Their first tears mingled together in a weak shower that brought neither relief nor fertility. 'Shame upon you Sebastian.' His mother's face was as smooth and pale as well-worked marble. 'Remember you are a Catholic, remember your

traditions.' Then she had gone from the room. They had lain together side by side; taking refuge in each other's physical warmth; feeding like birds on the small promises of the mouth: 'Caroline, I love you, yet before the last stroke of five sounded I betrayed you.' 'We must get married immediately,' she had said, the strength flowing back, her purpose now quite clear.

The very next day at lunch he had taken her hand. 'I think we ought to wait a little. I like you so much dear Caroline, but I had a long talk with my mother last night. She believes in us, as I knew she would, but she thinks it only fair on you to wait a little longer.'

The months had grown almost into two years. As her hope for their happiness diminished, so her faith grew, and her distress was never so great that she could not bear it. Unknowingly she experienced the seventh fruit of the Holy Ghost that is called longanimity.

Ibiza had been a last hope; a blinding joy that was as completely perfect as the fragments of land that crumble away from the main coastline, reproducing within their limits an exact miniature of the vegetation and fauna, but are visually limited on all sides by the sea. Caroline knew that whichever way she looked there was always this lapping despair, no way out, no hope of a future together.

On the train back to Victoria she had made a last attempt: ('Sometimes one can be mistaken about these things, perhaps I am too obtuse, perhaps he is waiting for me to say something,' she had thought.) 'Well, what do you think?' she had brought herself to say at last, pushing the dull sounding words through dry lips so that they came away whole and detached but completely unfeeling in any sense, a mere repetition of a hope that had been still-born after a painful delivery. Sebastian was silent, his

eyes followed the carefully planned harvest that was being carried on beyond the train window: 'If she does not speak now,' he thought, 'I can hope to extricate myself cleanly, I am completely untouched at this moment, except perhaps by the frayed edges of remorse worn comfortable as an old garment, but she could lacerate me again; she has that power with words; she could force me back into the rough sea, beat me about the head and shoulders so that perhaps I might sink.'

He heard the question now that she repeated it for the second time, and turning his face towards her he refused to interpret the meaning of her words: 'What do I think?' he threw the question back lightly now, returning it to her, hoping that she might let it trail away into the greenery and come to rest. 'I mean,' she pursued doggedly, 'What do you think about us, shall we be able to get married?'

The effort to remember his reply was now as if she tried to tear the bandage off a wound that had become stuck to the lint; when the raised crust of scab outlined through the material shows nothing except that a superficial process of healing has taken place.

For a whole month she neither saw nor telephoned him, a felted stillness seemed to enclose her in a world where like a recently etherized patient she was no longer exposed to the winds of direct feeling, but only to a tired recollection of pain. At the end of this time, with the slow revival of her senses, she sought to free herself from this self-imposed isolation, to focus her attention on something that would draw her out into the harsh light once more: she sat down and wrote a letter to Sebastian's mother: 'I would like you to arrange for me to be received into the Church.'

To take tea once more from the blue dragon cups, and hear the muffled sound of Sebastian's typewriter from the next room was not as unpleasing as she might have supposed it would be, it set her heart going at a rapid pace. Once he came to the door of his mother's room and smiled in on her. 'I am so pleased at your news, Caroline dear, and you must come to dinner with me one day soon,' and then he had swooped down on his hat and silver topped stick that lay on a chair, and with a vague but starry-eyed: 'I don't know when I shall be back Mama,' been gone from their sight.

'I am so pleased about him,' his mother had said after the door had firmly closed, 'he's found new friends, a charming young couple, of course I'm not supposed to know anything, but I do think that the wife, Claudine her name is, is just a little bit in love with our young man.' Caroline absorbed the information about Sebastian and remained unmoved. But her hostess was speaking again in a friendly and confidential tone: 'Well I always say that young men must sow their wild oats, and if a mother doesn't understand that, goodness knows who will. I'm thankful that at least the girl's a lady: she runs a little antique shop off Church Street, Kensington, it's called "Regrets", perhaps you've seen it, half way up on the left side.'

The friendship between the mother and the girl ripened, they were almost in daily communication by letter or telephone, only once was there a sign of flicker of the old resentment there had been against her. An old priest, in fact the one designated by Sebastian to marry them when the time came, had called one day whilst they sat sewing together in the lamplight. He held out his hands in an universal embrace; kindness and affection radiated from

him; 'My dear,' he said, 'so at last you have fixed the date, and you have chosen the most beautiful day, a great feast-day of the Mother of Christ, may you be blessed a thousand fold as you start your life together.' Caroline felt herself beginning to float away, almost she could cut the cables that bound her to her mortal frame: in moments of extreme distress or fear it was always thus, as if she sought an outside and greater aid than she would expect to find either within herself or from those directly around her. Sebastian's mother was speaking in a firm but friendly tone: 'No Father, it is something far more wonderful that is to happen on Our Lady's feast-day,' and then she paused as if to lend power and importance to the words that were to follow: 'Caroline is going to be received into the Church on the 8th December.'

Now the mother at her side patted her arm: the little ceremony of reception was over; a nun clothed in a purple and white habit fluttered out from the vestry — a plum coloured bird with a white cross outlined on her breast, 'I would like to embrace you my child.' Old skin touched her cheek, unfeeling lips sought blindly for contact with the recent grace that had been bestowed upon her.

Then Sebastian was at her side, bent up, his shoulders a little hunched, a small self-consciousness to be standing with her thus before his Sleeping Godhead. Silently he excused himself: 'But I have brought you this soul my God, you will not judge me too harshly when I have brought you the soul of Caroline?'

'We shall walk out of the church together,' Caroline thought. 'My baptism and martyrdom would not be complete without this, yet if it be possible my God let this Chalice pass. . . .'

'I have something for you at home, Caroline,' he said

kindly as they moved forward together, 'something I'd like you to keep always. I found this little crucifix in an antique shop, I think the figure is so beautifully carved it might almost be a Cellini.'

LOUIS GOLDING

The Switch at the Door

JIM DURRANCE had not made a success of his life. It might have been different if Jim's wife had not died in the first month of their marriage. But she had. After that nothing went right with him. He did not get on with the family (he was one of the Warwickshire Durrances) and he was 35 now, with no prospects, or rather less than no prospects. He thought of joining the Foreign Legion, but he knew he wasn't tough enough for that.

Then suddenly, out of the blue, an old acquaintance turned up and told him of a job that was waiting for him if he cared to take it on. An old Austrian Countess who lived in the Oetzthal, a valley at the back of beyond, wanted someone to help her with her memoirs, preferably an Englishman. She was, apparently, partial to Englishmen. There was not much money in it, but it was a billet for some months, at least. There were probably a few snags. The thought of an impoverished old Countess with a penchant, however innocuous, for Englishmen, sounded a little forbidding. But Jim Durrance was not in a position to pick and choose. He borrowed money for a wire, despatched it, and was requested to present himself at the Countess's Schloss at once.

The request was accompanied with a draft to cover travelling expenses.

The Countess wasn't as bad as he thought. She was, perhaps, a bit dotty, but he soon found out that nearly everyone in that remote valley was just a bit dotty. She had

a black cat which went about with her everywhere, like a familiar. Her hair was straggly as a crow's nest. Her clothes trailed two or three feet behind her, like a small boy pretending he is his grandmother. But he hadn't expected Dior chic in the Oetztal. She fed him well, and he got some wages, too; not very much, but enough to buy a litre of wine whenever he wanted one. And he wanted one quite frequently.

Everybody in that high lost valley was frightfully inbred, including the Countess. First cousins had been marrying first cousins for generations. Everybody either didn't have a chin, or they had too much. There was only one of the village girls who was good-looking. But she wasn't merely good-looking. She was beautiful. She would have been beautiful sitting in a box at the opera in far-off Vienna. She had skin like milk and cherries, and eyes like grapes. She had a body like a piece of music. Her name was Mariandl. And she was the daughter of Franz, the innkeeper, the richest man in the village.

In that valley, girls got married when they were sixteen, and none too soon, either. Mariandl seemed to be at least 22, and there were times, when you took her off-guard, so to speak, when she looked a lot older than that. On the other hand, there were times when she looked quite a child, as if she had never grown up, and never would. There was something fay about her, something other-worldly.

Jim Durrance sometimes wondered whether that was why she had never got married. She was the only child of old Franz, and far and away the prize catch of the place. Yet the young men hesitated to propose to a girl who was made of a stuff so much finer than theirs. Perhaps, too, she didn't feel any of these yokels quite of her own class. She

was waiting for someone altogether more refined to turn up.

Jim Durrance didn't suffer from excessive modesty. It occurred to him quite soon that he might himself be the very sort of man she had been waiting for. The job with the Countess wouldn't last for more than another three or four months. He fancied himself quite a lot as the successor to Franz the innkeeper, and even more as the husband to Mariandl. Her eyelashes were an inch long. Her voice was the voice of a dove in a tree.

Still, it wasn't absolutely certain Mariandl would take him on if he *did* propose to her. Her father might have something to say about it, too. What is more, he overheard a conversation one day from which he gathered that Mariandl might already have a young man somewhere. Perhaps that was what explained the whole matter. He put his heart into the job he had come out to do, in order to have something to fall back on, in case the Mariandl project fell through.

When he had tidied up the Countess's memoirs, it occurred to him it couldn't do any harm if he discussed the matter with the old dear. She had shown no signs of wanting him for herself, which he had found rather surprising, though it was a bit of a relief, too.

So he talked to her.

'Countess!' he started.

'Yes?'

'There's something I want to discuss with you!'

'Don't be a fool!' she said.

He blushed violently.

'I . . . I beg your pardon?' he stammered.

'You want to propose to the innkeeper's daughter!'

The old hag was obviously a good deal cleverer than he had thought.

'You're quite right!' he said tersely. 'What if I do?'

'Don't!' she proclaimed. 'She's already married!'

'*Married?*' His jaw dropped. 'To who?'

'To the Devil!' she informed him. 'She's a witch!' She stomped out of the room. The cat halted a moment, stared him straight in the eyes, then followed his mistress, his tail rigid as a poker.

'Well, I'll be damned!' he exclaimed. 'She's got the nerve to call someone *else* a witch! With that black cat, too! I thought she was just dotty! Well, that's not the half of it! Unless, of course—' He stopped, and straightened his tie, as he always did in moments like this. A light went on in his brain. 'Of course!' he murmured. 'She wants me for herself. She's mad with jealousy!'

Obviously, for various reasons, the sooner he got away from the Schloss the better. There was no point in delaying his proposal to Mariandl a day more. He put on his big scarf as well as his coat, for it was getting quite cold, and marched straight off to the inn. She was in the orchard when he got there, and was talking to someone. He heard her voice quite clearly. But the thing he had on his mind couldn't wait.

'Mariandl!' he called out. She turned.

'*Grüss Gott!*' she said.

'I hope I'm not interrupting anything—'

'Not at all!' she assured him.

'Didn't I hear you talking to someone?'

'Oh no!' she observed lightly.

'Can I come in?'

'Please!' she waved to him. He pushed the gate open and entered the orchard.

'Mariandl,' he said. 'I love you!'

'I like you, too,' she murmured.

He plunged straight at it.

'Will you marry me, Mariandl?'

She stood contemplating him for a full minute, unblinking. He was beginning to get quite uncomfortable. But, my God, how beautiful she was, how terribly beautiful!

She spoke at last. Her voice was very soft.

'You had better ask my father. He's near the woodshed.'

He strode over quickly, before the resolution went out of his kneecaps. He felt himself sweating all over. Yes, there old Franz was, piling up a pyramid of logs.

'*Herr Wirt!*' Jim Durrance said hoarsely. 'Mr Landlord! I want to marry your daughter!' Franz's arm shot out. Jim Durrance ducked. But the intention was not hostile.

'*Herr Engländer!*' boomed the landlord. 'It causes me great pleasure! Let it be with luck!' He seized Jim's hand and was tugging at it so violently, Jim thought it might drop off at the wrist. Then he pulled the Englishman towards the bar. 'Wine!' he roared. 'We must celebrate!'

With his free hand Jim tugged at his tie. This enthusiasm was very flattering, after all. He had been underrating himself, he decided. He was an Englishman, and of good family. His chest had broadened out a good deal lately. He had fine blue eyes, too.

It was arranged that the marriage should take place in a couple of weeks. 'After all,' said Franz. 'She is no child. She is 22. It is better no time should be lost. Tomorrow we will send for the lawyer from down the valley. There is the matter of the dowry to arrange. She will inherit the inn, of course.' Anybody would think old Franz was dying to be rid of the girl, he was so anxious to get everything signed, sealed and delivered. His eyes sparkled. His cheeks glowed like oil lamps. But after all (Jim told himself) it was not every landlord in the Oetzal who married off his

daughter to a Durrance, one of the Warwickshire Durrances.

'Where shall we go for our honeymoon, darling?' breathed Jim later that evening, when he at last managed to get the girl to himself for a minute or two. 'How about Vienna? Have you ever been to Vienna? There's a sweet little hotel I know behind the Dom. The *König von Ungarn*, they call it—'

'No, sweetheart!' she put her petal-soft finger on his lip. 'There's an inn up the valley, the Black Lamb. Far off. A long way from everybody. Let's go there. We'll be all on our own. It will be lovely!'

'But, darling, wouldn't it be fun to have just a few people about in the evening? And soft lights on the tables, and perhaps a little band—'

She was a young lady who knew her own mind. They went to the Black Lamb for their honeymoon, far up the Oetztal. A long way from everybody. It was a wild and shaggy place, rather frightening, if the truth were told. A cold wind was blowing. A first flurry of snow-flakes stung their cheeks.

But he had Mariandl with him. She had never looked more enchanting. What did the wind matter, howling down from the glaciers, or the snow-flakes sharp as gravel? They had dinner, and sat over their wine for some time. She seemed preoccupied. It seemed as if she were waiting for someone, who might turn up sooner or later. There was nothing very much to look at in the place. They were the only people there. The tiled oven was getting cold, too. No-one had thought of putting any more logs in.

'Darling!' he murmured. She did not seem to hear. 'Darling!' he said a little more loudly. She heard this time.

'Yes?' Her tone was quite sharp.

'Shall we go to our room?'

'Why not?' she said.

They ascended the bare scrubbed staircase. The floor-boards creaking under their tread. This was the door of their room, here on the left. He turned the light on, from the switch by the door-jamb. It was a large, an enormous room, and very cold, lit by a single dim globe hanging high in the centre of the ceiling. The bed was far off, in the furthest corner, diminished by the vast empty space between itself and the door. She undressed and got into bed, and turned to the wall. He went in after her. She did not say a word to him. It was as if she had known him a long time and had long since lost all interest in him. Or as if she did not know him at all.

He was silent for some time, his heart tolling like a bell under the sea. Then he spoke.

'I'll get out and turn the light off,' he said. 'Shall I?'

'You can do what you like,' she observed indifferently. Then suddenly she turned from the wall, sat up in her bed, looked towards the far-off door. She seemed to be listening.

Then a light spurted in her eyes.

'*Honey!*' she breathed. Her voice was almost inaudible. She was not talking to *him*. Her eyes were still on the door. The door-handle turned, and the door opened. No-one visible entered. There was a click by the door-jamb as the electric switch was turned off. Across the darkness of the room an icy breath moved.

L. P. HARTLEY

A Capital Distribution

CHRISTMAS EVE had been for all the Marriners, except Mr Marriner, a most exhausting day. The head of the house usually got off lightly at the festive season, lightly that is as far as personal effort went. Financially, no; Mr Marriner knew that financially quite a heavy drain was being made on his resources. And later in the evening when he got out his cheque book to give his customary presents to his family, his relations and the staff, the drain would be heavier. But he could afford it, he could afford it better this Christmas than at any other Christmas in the history of his steadily increasing fortune. And he didn't have to think, he didn't have to choose; he only had to consult a list, and add one or two names, and cross off one or two. There was quite a big item to cross off, quite a big item, though it didn't figure on the list or on the counterfoil of his cheque book. If he saw fit he would add the sum so saved to his children's cheques. Jeremy and Anne would then think him even more generous than he was, and if his wife made any comment, which she wouldn't, being a tactful woman, he would laugh and call it a Capital Distribution — 'capital in every sense, my dear!'

But this could wait till after dinner.

So of the quartet who sat down to the meal, he was the only one who hadn't spent a laborious day. His wife and Anne had both worked hard decorating the house and making arrangements for the party on Boxing Day. They hadn't spent the time in getting presents, they hadn't had to. Anne, who was two years older than Jeremy, inherited

her mother's gift for present-giving and had made her selections weeks ago; she had a sixth sense for knowing what people wanted. But Jeremy had left it all to the last moment. His method was the reverse of Anne's and much less successful; he thought of the present first and the recipient afterwards. Who would this little box do for? Who would this other little box do for? Who should be the fortunate possessor of this third little box? In present-giving his mind followed a one-way track; and this year it was little boxes. They were expensive and indiscriminating presents and he was secretly ashamed of them. Now it was too late to do anything more: but when he thought of the three or four friends who would remain un-boxed his conscience smote him.

Silent and self-reproachful, he was the first to hear the singing outside the window.

'Listen, there's some carol singers!' His voice, which was breaking, plunged and croaked.

The others all stopped talking and smiles broke out on their faces.

'Quite good, aren't they?'

'The first we've had this year,' said Mrs Marriner.

'Well, not the first, my dear; they started coming days ago, but I sent them away and said that waits must wait till Christmas Eve.'

'How many of them are there?'

'Two, I think,' said Jeremy.

'A man and a woman?'

Jeremy got up and drew the curtain. Pierced only by a single distant street-lamp, the darkness in the garden pressed against the window-pane.

'I can't quite see,' he said, coming back. 'But I think it's a man and a boy.'

'A man and a boy?' said Mr Marriner. 'That's rather unusual.'

'Perhaps they're choristers, Daddy. They do sing awfully well.'

At that moment the front door bell rang. To preserve the character of the house, which was an old one, they had retained the original brass bell-pull. When it was pulled the whole house seemed to shudder audibly, with a strangely searching sound, as if its heart-strings had been plucked, while the bell itself gave out a high yell, that split into a paroxysm of jangling. The Marriners were used to this phenomenon, and smiled when it made strangers jump: tonight it made them jump themselves. They listened for the sound of footsteps crossing the stone flags of the hall, but there was none.

'Mrs Parfitt doesn't come till washing-up time,' said Mrs Marriner. 'Who'll go and give them something?'

'I will,' Anne said, jumping up. 'What shall I give them, Daddy?'

'Oh, give them a bob,' said Mr Marriner, producing the coin from his pocket. However complicated the sum required he always had it.

Anne set off with the light step and glowing face of an eager benefactor; she came back after a minute or two at a much slower pace and looking puzzled and rather frightened. She didn't sit down but stood over her place with her hands on the chairback.

'He said it wasn't enough,' she said.

'Wasn't enough?' her father repeated. 'Did he really say that?'

Anne nodded.

'Well, I like his check.' Even to his family Mr Marriner's moods were unforeseeable; by some chance the man's

impudence had touched a sympathetic chord in him. 'Go back and say that if they sing another carol they shall have another bob.'

But Anne didn't move.

'If you don't mind, Daddy, I'd rather not.'

They all three raised questioning faces to hers.

'You'd rather not? Why?'

'I didn't like his manner.'

'Whose, the man's?'

'Yes. The boy — you were right, Jeremy, it is a boy, quite a small boy — didn't say anything.'

'What was wrong with the man's manner?' Mr Marriner, still genial, asked.

'Oh, I don't know!' Anne began to breathe quickly and her fingers tightened on the chair-back. 'And it wasn't only his manner.'

'Henry, I shouldn't—' began Mrs Marriner warningly, when suddenly Jeremy jumped up. He saw the chance to redeem himself in his own eyes from his ineffectiveness over the Christmas shopping — from the general ineffectiveness that he was conscious of whenever he compared himself with Anne.

'Here's the shilling,' Anne said, holding it out. 'He wouldn't take it.'

'This will make it two,' their father said, suiting the action to the word. 'But only if they sing again, mind you.'

While Jeremy was away, they all fell silent, Anne still trying to compose her features, Mr Marriner tapping on the table, his wife studying her rings. At last she said,

'They're all so class-conscious nowadays.'

'It wasn't that,' said Anne.

'What was it?'

Before she had time to answer — if she would have

answered — the door opened and Jeremy came in, flushed and excited but also triumphant, with the triumph he had won over himself. He didn't go to his place but stood away from the table looking at his father.

'He wouldn't take it,' he said. 'He said it wasn't enough. He said you would know why.'

'I should know why?' Mr Marriner's frown was an effort to remember something. 'What sort of a man is he, Jeremy?'

'Tall and thin, with a pulled-in face.'

'And the boy?'

'He looked about seven. He was crying.'

'Is it anyone you know, Henry?' asked his wife.

'I was trying to think. Yes, no, well, yes, I might have known him.' Mr Marriner's agitation was now visible to them all, and even more felt than seen. 'What did you say, Jeremy?'

Jeremy's breast swelled.

'I told him to go away.'

'And has he gone?'

As though in answer the bell pealed again.

'I'll go this time,' said Mrs Marriner. 'Perhaps I can do something for the child.'

And she was gone before her husband's outstretched arm could stop her.

Again the trio sat in silence, the children less concerned with themselves than with the gleam that kept coming and going in their father's eyes like a dipping headlight.

Mrs Marriner came back much more self-possessed than either of her children had.

'I don't think he means any harm,' she said, 'he's a little cracked, that's all. We'd better humour him. He said he wanted to see you, Henry, but I told him you were out.'

He said that what we offered wasn't enough and that he wanted what you gave him last year, whatever that means. So I suggest we give him something that isn't money, Perhaps you could spare him one of your boxes, Jeremy. A Christmas box is quite a good idea.'

'He won't take it,' said Anne, before Jeremy could speak.

'Why not?'

'Because he can't,' said Anne.

'Can't? What do you mean?' Anne shook her head. Her mother didn't press her.

'Well, you are a funny girl,' she said. 'Anyhow, we can but try. Oh, and he said they'd sing us one more carol.'

They set themselves to listen, and in a moment the strains of 'God rest you merry, gentlemen' began.

Jeremy got up from the table.

'I don't believe they're singing the words right,' he said. He went to the window and opened it, letting in a puff of icy air.

'Oh, do shut it!'

'Just a moment. I want to make sure.'

They all listened, and this is what they heard.

'God blast the master of this house,

Likewise the mistress too,

And all the little children,

That round the table go.'

Jeremy shut the window. 'Did you hear?' he croaked.

'I thought I did,' said Mrs Marriner. 'But it might have been "bless", the words sound so much alike. Henry, dear, don't look so serious.'

The door bell rang for the third time. Before the jangling died down, Mr Marriner rose shakily.

'No, no, Henry,' said his wife. 'Don't go, it'll only encourage them. Besides, I said you were out.' He looked

at her doubtfully, and the bell rang again, louder than before. 'They'll soon get tired of it,' she said, 'if no one comes. Henry, I beg you not to go.' And when he still stared at her with groping eyes, she added:

'You can't remember how much you gave him last year?' Her husband made an impatient gesture with his hand.

'But if you go take one of Jeremy's boxes.'

'It isn't a box they want,' he said, 'it's a bullet.'

He went to the sideboard and brought out a pistol. It was an old-fashioned saloon pistol, a relic from the days when Henry's father, in common with others of his generation, had practised pistol-shooting, and it had lain at the back of a drawer in the sideboard longer than any of them could remember.

'No, Henry, no! You mustn't get excited! And think of the child!'

She was on her feet now; they all were.

'Stay where you are!' he snarled.

'Anne! Jeremy! Tell him not to! Try to stop him.' But his children could not in a moment shake off the obedience of a lifetime, and helplessly they watched him go.

'But it isn't any good, it isn't any good!' Anne kept repeating.

'What isn't any good, darling?'

'The pistol. You see, I've seen through him!'

'How do you mean, seen through him? Do you mean he's an imposter?'

'No, no. I've really seen through him,' Anne's voice sank to a whisper. 'I saw the street lamp shining through a hole in his head.'

'Darling, darling!'

'Yes, and the boy, too—'

'Will you be quiet, Anne?' cried Jeremy from behind the window curtain. 'Will you be quiet? They're saying something. Now Daddy's pointing the gun at him — he's got him covered! His finger's on the trigger, he's going to shoot! No, he isn't. The man's come nearer — he's come right up to Daddy! Now he's showing him something, something on his forehead — oh if I had a torch — and Daddy's dropped it, he's dropped the gun!'

As he spoke they heard the clatter; it was like the sound that gives confirmation to a wireless commentator's words. Jeremy's voice broke out again:

'He's going off with them — he's going off with them! They're leading him away!'

Before she or any of them could reach the door, Mrs Marriner had fainted.

The police didn't take long to come. On the grass near the garden gate they found the body. There were signs of a struggle — a slither, like a skid mark, on the gravel, heel marks dug deep into the turf. Later it was learnt that Mr Marriner had died of coronary thrombosis. Of his assailants not a trace was found. But the motive couldn't have been robbery, for all the coins he had had in his pockets, and all the notes out of his wallet, in fact all his available capital, lay scattered round him, as if he had made a last attempt to buy his captors off, but couldn't give them enough.

E. W. HILDICK

The Cathedral

WE'D been watching the Cathedral from the bus for about ten minutes before we arrived; first to the right, then left, then right again, but always in front and always above and bigger and bigger, shining in the sun, and, 'There it is!' said Bluey. 'There, no, there!' he kept saying; and, 'All right!' we said, and, 'Isn't it big?' and, 'What a good position!' just to show him we'd really seen it, to prove it and to get him to wrap up because everyone kept turning round and smiling quiet, whispering, probably, how those three airmen were new to the place. And because nobody wants to be thought new to a place, even in this mob, we wanted Bluey to belt up.

You know Bluey. He's the one on that snap of the boys in Hut 14 with the sweeping-brush at the slope, the tall thin kid with the red complexion, though you can't see that, and tight lips as if he's always keeping something in with a lot of effort, though he wasn't now. 'Come on', he says, as soon as we got off, 'let's go up there now.' But, 'What's your hurry?' says Vono, who's not on the snap but Jewy-looking, though he isn't one, with crinkly black hair and thick glasses and blue chin. 'What's your hurry?' he says, 'I'm not climbing that bee hill on the tack we just had in the Mess, what about you, Bash?' 'No bee fear,' I said, because it's catching, all Vono's bees, and, 'Mind your language, airman!' cuts in a corporal with a dark bint swinging on his tapes, as if she cared — about my language, I mean. 'Who's he?' I said to Bluey and Bluey

shrugs, and, 'Never mind him', says Vono, 'I'm hungry.'

Well so was I and Bluey must have been, too, for next thing we're in the Naafi Club lining up with our trays, with Vono all greasy round the mouth even before we'd started on the grub — and what grub! We had tongue in rolls with little sprigs of parsley and rolls just crisp without tongue, and lumps of butter you have to be careful not to break as you spear them out of the water, and currant rolls still warm, and meringues and cheese-biscuits and, 'How much is that?' we asked, with one or two items tucked under others.

Then we ate, over by the windows, overlooking the canal. 'Just like Venice,' says Vono with his mouth full, and, 'When were you ever in Venice?' I said, winking at Bluey, and, 'Who the bee hell says you've got to be in Venice to know what it's like, what with pictures and books?' says Vono. 'Listen', says Bluey, 'stop bulling your load about places you know nothing about when there's this Cathedral waiting outside, ripe in the sun, what they're probably talking about in Venice right now. Hell, I bet there's more than one Venetian right now who'd give his right arm for the chance.' 'Your turn to get the tea,' says Vono. 'All right', says Bluey, 'but you wait till you've seen it.' 'We've seen it.' 'T'll you've been right up there and then you'll know what I mean.' 'How many lumps?' 'Two,' I said. 'Four', says Vono, 'and fetch us another round of meringues, they're smashing.'

'Poor old Bluey', says Vono, 'he's crackers about that old heap, anyone'd think he'd got a woman up there.' 'Well maybe he has', I said, 'anyway, what is the attraction?' 'This butter's delicious,' he says, scraping up what was left on the side of his plate with a finger and licking it off. 'I don't know really but he's got one of his surprises

for us when we get there.' 'Aw no, not again', I said, 'remember his rare tropical blossom when we all nearly got jankers for trespassing in the A.O.C's garden and it was only cherry anyway?' 'Too bee true,' says Vono; 'Hello, what's he waving about? — *Well use a tray!*'

So after that, and after we'd kept him hanging on a bit while we smoked and watched the Poles in their spiv suits in the lounge, we set off.

It was the first really warm Saturday of spring and, what with the crowds and all the women looking so cool in their light-coloured frocks and us in our thick Best Blues, we were pretty well lathered even before we started to climb. And all the time, shooting up above us, above the heads and the buildings, there was the Cathedral, looking near one minute and far away the next. 'Bee hell', says Vono, 'aren't we there yet?' 'Soon,' says Bluey, pressing on in front so we'd to run almost to keep up with him. 'Soon! Tell us when to put the bee oxygen masks on then,' says Vono — but Bluey wasn't listening.

Finally we came to a steep narrow lane where everyone was walking in the middle and one or two cars were honking and trying to get through. There were ice-cream shops and boozers, and junk-shops all black inside, with trays of old books outside and beads in the windows, and kids squawking for ice-cream and old dears in bath chairs, 'The last village before the summit,' says Vono, 'the bee bazaar and squad halt! Not another step, go on without me, gentlemen, I'm a hero, I'll not be a hindrance.' And he did stop, too, bang in the middle of the pavement, his face all greasy with sweat. Bluey must have got half way up before he found the cold young thing he was talking to wasn't us, and was he red when he came back. 'What's up?' he says. 'Ice-cream', says Vono, 'or not another inch.'

Well Bluey didn't argue, probably wanting the bird to get well clear for one thing, and feeling a bit hot himself for another, so we bought three choc-ices and pretended to be looking at a lot of coloured pot statues while we ate in the shade of one of the junk-shops. A pink little bloke in black came up with a sharp look at our uniforms and our ices. 'Were you wanting anything?' he says, with an even sharper look at our pockets. Bluey and I were already edging out but Vono didn't budge. 'Tell me', he says in his best millionaire-ranker tones, 'how much is this little bit of Dresden heah?' And he picks up a pot pig and starts weighing it up and down like a pound of bacon. The little bloke wasn't impressed. 'That object, sir', he says in a voice like brand-new nails, 'is not ah Dresden and I wish you'd put it down. Its price, in case you should break it, is three-and-a-half guineas.' 'Hum', says Vono, 'then I think I'll leave it for now. Good afternoon to you.' And rolling up his silver paper into a sticky little ball he jammed it between the pig's back legs and came out. 'A disreputable place,' he said loud, still in his Rolls voice, 'let us seek the unmercenary quiet of the cloister.' That made some of the civvies look, not half; and even Bluey had to grin. Trust old Vono to show them we're not ignorant just because we're in uniform.

So we climbed on, still with Bluey in the lead, striding out, breaking us a way through the crowds, and in a bit we reached the top. Well we hadn't much breath left by then, but when we reached the flat and turned a corner the sudden sight of the Cathedral right on top of us took away what was left. We just stood and stared, with Bluey all smiles, looking first at us and then at the Cathedral as if to say, Now then—! 'So this is your surprise?' says Vono, very quiet. 'Well one of 'em,' says Bluey. 'One of 'em?' says

Vono, giving me a nudge, but half-hearted because he was still staring up. 'Yes, one of 'em,' says Bluey. 'What d'you think of it?'

'Christ!' says Vono.

'Me too,' I said.

Well what else could you say? It was so big it was tremendous. It was like fifty A.O.C's parades at once, for its size. And yet it was all so delicate-looking too, something you never noticed down there in the streets. Strong and delicate, hard and soft, still and moving, moving up and down, up and down those cracks and corners and spires. The stone was grey and white, but mostly white, like the clouds that kept passing behind it. It looked as if all those pigeons for hundreds of years had been splashing it, drop by drop, until there was a crust of it creeping down the stonework.

'Well?' said Bluey.

'Like a wedding-cake', said Vono, 'but better.'

Bluey was glad. He grinned. 'I don't know why', he said, 'but it reminds me of those liquorice pipes we had when we were kids, pan-pipes, only more of 'em and bigger and white instead of black. Come on.'

We followed him slowly, looking up all the time. It made you want to get hold of it. You wanted to get it, sharp and clear for good and all, and all the time you knew you couldn't, not even with a camera, same as most of the others round about were trying to do. We didn't say much. We just followed Bluey, who prowled in front of us, half stooping, looking a bit like a weasel setting a rabbit. Then, every now and then, he would stop and point and say, 'Look at that,' and, 'Look at this,' and we'd get more talkative about some of the angels and devils and beasts and men carved in the stone, feeling a bit

relieved like when you meet an old pal at some posh dance full of strangers. 'Look at that', says Vono, 'just like the S.W.O. if he'd got horns, which the old cow might have, come to think of it.' 'Yes', says Bluey, and this really seemed to please him, 'but for a dead spitting image you've seen nothing yet.' 'Aye, aye', says Vono, 'that's his next bee surprise. Who's it like? Old Bash here?' 'Wait and see,' says Bluey. And on we went, seeing the Cathedral whole again against the sky, with its pigeons and its buttresses and its firm green base of turf that made you want to walk on it, it looked so smooth.

There were plenty of people inside and they were all over; but there was plenty of room all the same, and it was cool. There were folks in little groups like us, just drifting; and there were folks in big groups, all standing together and listening to some bloke going on about history; and there were young couples hand-in-hand; and there were families resting on the pews, just sitting, telling their kids to hush or the mister will chuck you out; and there were old ladies praying on their own; and there were blokes in long black robes in ones and twos, threading their way in and out of the people like old white-headed crows with their wings back walking amongst a lot of sparrows.

Bluey was showing us all over, and, 'Look at this,' and, 'Look at that,' he kept on, and somehow we didn't mind being made to look new to the place this time, because it didn't seem to matter. At least, I didn't mind and I don't think Vono did, because he wasn't saying much and he was drinking it all in, all the little chapels and screens and brasswork and he didn't even make one crack about Brasso; and there was Bluey, showing us old faded tattered colours in some of the chapels and a lot of rich stuff back in the main part. 'Well', said Bluey, 'what d'you

think?' 'Very nice,' says Vono, and, 'Me too,' I said. 'What I like best in here,' says Vono, 'is all these windows; you don't get an idea outside, look at the colours.' And it was a sight, seeing them like that in the high curved shadows, glowing and sending down rays.

Well, after a bit we got to a corner we'd passed already and Bluey stops and says, 'Right fellers, get your bobs out,' and at this Vono looks at him and then at me and then at Bluey, and, 'Not bl—,' he nearly said but stopped in time, and, 'Not likely,' he says, 'if you can't show us round without charging us, boy, then what about yesterday morning's Naafi break you owe me for and who paid for the bus fares.' 'No, no, no,' says Bluey, all grins, 'for going up the tower I mean, this is where you pay.' And sure enough there was one of the little old crows by a bit of red rope railing, near a doorway, with a box and a notice in a glass case. 'Oh', says Vono, 'I see. You mean we can go up there for a bob,' and, 'Yes', says Bluey, 'that's my surprise.' 'Well', says Vono, 'I knew all about this because I saw some people right up on top when we were outside. I was just waiting for this', he says, 'and I was thinking the surprise might be you paying for us.' 'Oh, all right', says Bluey, all eager to be off, 'I'll pay seeing as it's only once.' And he did too, and soon we were going up some steps and then, just when we were getting used to them, out we go on to a gallery half way up the walls.

Up there you got an even better view of the inside of the Cathedral; and we walked slow, looking at the stained glass, and the pews, and what not, in single file, because there were quite a few coming towards us, back from where they'd been, all laughing and excited, not like us except Bluey, who kept turning round and saying, 'Come on.'

Then we reached another doorway, dark, and Bluey

says, 'This is it, this is where we start climbing.' 'Just a minute', says Vono, 'you mean we haven't climbed yet?' 'No', says Bluey, 'this is where we begin and keep in single file because it's narrow.' 'You're telling us', I said, 'and look at it twisting; is it like this all the way?' 'Every bit', says Bluey, 'come on.' And it was, too, round and round and up and up, and you had to be careful because at one side there was hardly any step at all, so that you'd to stop to let people get past, and it made your ankles go funny and in a bit your head because, what with the breeze blowing through the loopholes and the twisting round and round and getting short of breath and the feeling that you couldn't stop but had to keep on going — all this made you want to laugh, especially with Vono, who kept on cursing Bluey every step now that he felt he wasn't in the Cathedral itself, the churchy part I mean. Now and then we came to little places leading off the stairs and we thought that each one was the top, but no, not yet, and we even passed one that looked like an engine room with the clock's works in it. 'Let's see this', says Vono, 'I was always interested in clocks, right from being a kid; aw hell, look, he's still climbing. We'd better keep up, or he'll be losing us.' Well I couldn't see how he could, personally, unless there was another way down, but I hadn't the strength to argue, and to tell the truth I was beginning to feel queer, so I just followed.

At last we reached the top, in a flush of sunlight and sky that fairly made your eyes smart after the dark steps, and it was windy. Even Vono's hair was blowing about and one or two women up there were having all on to keep decent, not that we paid much attention because you can see that any windy day, free, but not this view all round us which we'd paid a shilling for, and anyway they were

no pin-ups. So we leaned on the parapet, which came up high, good job, and rested and looked. We kept on looking even after we'd rested, but we weren't so static, going from one side to the other and saying, 'Come here, just look at this,' and, 'Isn't that the race-course?' and, 'Look, can you see the flood waters over there in the sunlight?' and, 'I wonder if we can see the camp,' and, 'Who wants to see the bee camp?' Then Vono sees the pigeons and that tickles him. He hitches on to the parapet until we begin to fear for him, and he looks right over and down and starts spitting. 'Hey!' says Blucy, 'cut it out! What're you doing? You'll be hitting somebody!' But when we looked over too we could see Vono's point, because it looked down far below to the greeny-coloured roof, and further still to green squares like bowling greens in the middle of all the buildings, and no one in danger except the pigeons that were fluttering off the sides of the tower and floating round, showing us their colours in the sun, lovely from above, what with blues and greys and fawns and creams and that rainbow colour — like petrol on a wet road. 'The little mistakes,' says Vono, between spits. 'I always wanted to get my own back, take that, and that, and that.' Not that he was having any success, though there were several near-misses, so we joined in and it was good.

Well, whether the people up there thought we were drunk or whether it was their tea-time or whether they just didn't fancy the bother of having to attend our inquests, I don't know, but when we'd finished with the pigeons we'd got it to ourselves. So we went and sat back on the bit of sloping roof in the middle, got our heads down out of the full force of the wind, and lay back. We had a bit of a legal argument about whether we could smoke up there and in the end Vono and me won and we

all lit up and looked at the clouds and felt peaceful.

'How high is it?' says Vono. 'About 300 feet,' says Bluey. 'Who says?' says Vono. 'I read it in the papers', says Bluey, 'when that woman chucked herself off, and anyway you'd read it in the guide-book if you wasn't too mean to buy one.' 'Christ', says Vono, 'you mean someone actually jumped off?' and he gets to his feet. 'Where? Which side?' 'This one I think', says Bluey, 'because it said she landed in the grass.' We looked down and I felt funny behind my knees. 'Yes', says Bluey, 'it said she made a hole in the turf three feet.' 'Aw, get chased', says Vono, 'you're thinking of that trainee back at camp who baled out of a plane and fouled his chute.' 'Well, maybe I am', says Bluey, 'but oh, but look, I'd nearly forgot, there's the other surprise.' 'What? Where?' we said. 'Just down there, see him? Just above that spout thing.' We looked at the little grey head with a splash of pigeon lime trickled over its rubbed-out nose. 'Well', says Vono, 'what about it?' 'Well can't you see?' says Bluey. 'Hey, mind! Don't lean out so far. That's better. What about you, Bash?' he says. 'Who's it like?' I stared at its wrinkled-up eyes and its thick lips. It did seem a bit familiar, but not all that much. Anyway, I had a bash. 'Old Vono here,' I said. 'Yes, yes', yells Bluey, 'exactly.' 'What?' says Vono. 'Me? Get.' 'Just', says Bluey, 'look, Vono, just get back here and take your specs off.' Well Vono did it with a little smile, as if he were saying, just to humour you, same as you look sometimes when somebody pesters you to pose for a photo, and as soon as his glasses came off his eyes went all screwed up and what with the smile it did look like that face thing. 'He's right, Vono,' I said. 'You bet I'm right,' says Bluey, and Vono puts his specs back and we all had another look.

'Well', says Vono, 'all right, but who's it supposed to be?' — probably wishing it was some king or other he'd turned out to be a descendant of. 'Oh, maybe one of the blokes working on the contract,' says Bluey. 'What, and his mate hanging over there and carving it out at this height? What did they have?' 'They'd have ladders and scaffolding just like now', says Bluey, 'and anyway, he probably knocked it out one dinner-hour while old Vono Mark One there was stuffing himself sick if he was anything like you, and they'd be down on the ground maybe, or on this roof even, and they'd fit that bit in when it was finished, perhaps. I don't know.'

We didn't say anything for a bit, at least I didn't, and we just leaned and looked at the old stones below us and it made me think we'd been on the job ourselves, all this talk, and if you were careful not to look at the others so their uniforms didn't spoil it, you could imagine we were having a quiet scrounge while the foreman or whatever they called him in those days wasn't looking.

But someone had mentioned grub and then we heard laughing as some more people came on to the tower, so Vono looks at his watch and says, 'Well, what about it?' Then we went down, twisting and turning again, only faster than coming up so it made us giddier, and Vono kept stopping and making us pull up sharp, and by the time we reached the gallery we felt a bit drunk and very light, anyway I did, and the others acted like it. And along the gallery we went in all the coloured light, and down again, and past the old Dad in the robe, and past the people, kneeling and sitting and strolling, and out into the sunlight again. And there we stood a minute or two and had a last look at the Cathedral, all friendly and close and big, before going down into town.

HUGH MICHAEL HOGAN

Of Human Kindness

BEFORE June came and the sun melted the tar on its surface we used to roller skate along the little High Street as far as the dairy, but usually we turned back again before we got quite as far as that, because we were afraid, somehow, of the dairy. Sometimes, when we were dared, we would leap from the road on to the pavement outside the shop: the wheels of our skates would make a hideous noise as they rolled over the uneven edges of the flags, and then we would go and hide, breathless, around the corner, and the boldest among us would peep out to see what happened.

Most often, nothing would happen, and then we would be scared to go past its door again in case somebody was waiting on the other side. Sometimes the curtains would part an inch or two, and a little of the woman's face would peer out from the opening; this would fill us with dread, and we would stand still for a long time, behind the corner, and then go quietly away along the back streets to play in some other part of the town.

This was before anything happened in the dairy.

The first time I had to go into the dairy I was very frightened. It was hot, that morning. It had been hot during the night, and I woke early, before the dawn, and rolled back the bedclothes. I took off my pyjamas and lay naked on the warm, smooth sheets, letting the pre-dawn breeze play gently with my skin. The whole town slept. Gradually, as it became light, I could hear it awakening;

the air became still again; and sounds came to me from neighbouring streets: the eager questions of a child, an old man's muttering, the opening of doors, the whistling of a kettle. I lay still, making pictures in my mind of the scenes behind the noises; it seemed as if every window in the town were open, as if the huge, up-thrusting sun were welding the people into one great family.

After a while I heard my mother get up and go past my room. I waited until I heard the sound of water running through the pipes, and the *plop* of the gas stove, and then I dressed and followed her downstairs.

The living room smelt of tobacco smoke and whisky. Glasses stood beside chairs, and one, on its side, was on the floor. On the table was an empty bottle. My mother was standing on a chair, opening the window. She looked round as she heard me, then:

'The milk hasn't come,' she said. 'You'll have to fetch it.'

I felt the kink of fear in my stomach. 'From the dairy?'

'From the dairy. Where else would you get milk?' She sounded cross.

I began to think about the woman in the dairy. About the dark eyes that peeped out from behind the curtain. 'Couldn't we wait a bit longer? Perhaps the milkman will come soon. Perhaps he's coming now. I'll go and see.'

She went into the kitchen, came back with a china jug, 'Two pints, I want. I don't think the milkman will come. He was complaining of the heat yesterday.' Her eyes went to the glass that lay on the floor. 'Hurry up, your father will be wanting his tea.'

I put on my sandals and picked up the jug.

The paving was already hot to my feet as I walked to the dairy. I walked slowly, feeling its edges with my toes.

In the lane that led on to the High Street I stopped, leaning against the wall; I thought that if I waited long enough the street might come to life, and then if anything happened to me inside the dairy there would be someone to run to. I waited a long time, perhaps ten minutes, until I heard a door open.

I turned the corner. The fruiterer's was coming to life. The smells of apples, and oranges, and sweet, spicy odours came out through its open door. As I passed it I knew at once how I would enter the dairy: I would leave the door open behind me, so that I could escape if I needed. I walked on to the dairy, and looked in its window.

There was little to see. The front was of marble, and there was a big, marble slab in the window with, behind it, two smaller platforms, also of marble, cut like steps. At the back, and over the door, were thick lace curtains. In the middle of the marble slab was a basket; it was cold, and broken, and in it were a few eggs, brown ones and white, and propped up against the basket was a piece of thick cardboard with torn edges. On the card was written, in crude, block letters: NEW LAID EGGS. I walked up the steps and opened the door.

I had been wrong about the door. So long as it remained open a bell rang, inside the house. For a long time I could not move, and the noise seemed to grow in intensity until I thought it must make the woman angry. I slammed the door shut, and stood against it; my hands were sweating and my throat was dry.

It was cold inside the shop. The walls were of marble, right to the ceiling, and a wide, marble counter ran round three sides. Great cylinders of butter, cheese and lard stood on shelves at the left, and on the right was a big, new bacon machine, painted red and silver. In the centre,

so high that I could see it beyond the counter, was a huge, metal chest. It gave off a gentle, humming noise.

There was no sound from the house. Beyond the counter was a glass door, lace curtained, and I watched it for the shadow that would tell of someone's coming. There were steps leading from the doorway down into the shop.

My fear began to leave me. I decided that, if nobody came very soon, I would go home and say to my mother that the shop had not opened yet. Perhaps on the way I could get a bottle of processed milk, so that I should not have to return.

I was wondering whether to do this at once, when I saw a shadow behind the curtain. Then the door opened, and down the steps and into the shop came—a man.

I had been waiting for the woman whose face I had seen as she peeped out on to the street, and it had never occurred to me that there could be a man in the shop. Seeing him, I did not feel so afraid. He came along the counter and stopped opposite me. 'Good morning, sir.'

It was the first time anybody had called me 'sir', and at first I thought he was mocking me. But when I looked at him more closely I began to see that he was not that kind of man. His eyes were big, and soft, like a spaniel's eyes, and he had an eager, friendly voice.

'Two pints of milk, please.' I went over to the counter and held out the jug. He leaned over to look at me, but made no move to take the jug.

'Haven't seen you before, have I?' He spoke quietly. 'Do you live here?'

'The man didn't come,' I said. 'Is he sick?'

'They're all sick. Sick in the heart. Sick in the soul.' He said this more to himself than to me, then: 'Will you be coming for the milk, now? What's your name?'

'Yes. My name's Francis.'

'Francis. That's a nice name. Yes. Francis.' He looked at me steadily for a moment, and then out of the window. 'Francis,' he said. 'Francis.' Suddenly he turned back from the window. 'If I'd had a boy I would have called him John.'

'I wish I'd been called John. Francis is a soppy name.'

He took my jug. 'Oh, now, I wouldn't say that. I wouldn't say that. It's just that, for a boy, John's best, I think. John's a good name to have.' He leaned on the counter. 'You know, it's easy to be John. You don't get your leg pulled with a name like John. I mean, other kids don't take it out of you so much.'

'I know,' I said. 'When I'm outside I make them call me Frank. Francis is soppy. It's a girl's name.'

He nodded gently. 'Yes. Yes, I think that's about the best thing to do.'

Over our heads there was a sound. A board creaked. He looked up, then moved towards the door. 'You'll have to excuse me a minute. The milk's out in the yard. Two pints, isn't it?'

When he had gone I began to wonder about him. I wondered how it was that I had never seen him before. I liked him. It was easy to talk to him. He had grey hair, and so I knew that he must be very old, but he didn't talk like other grown-ups I knew. It was like talking to one of the gang. I thought that perhaps it was his being so small that accounted for it. He was small, and thin, and gentle, and looked as if he hadn't grown up very far, not like my father. I wondered if being little made it easier for a man to talk with boys: I was still wondering about this when he came back, and put the jug on the counter.

'Do you smoke?' he asked.

'No.' When I had said it I realized that he would not have minded if I had spoken the truth.

'No, you don't want to start too early. How old are you?'

'I'm past nine.'

'Yes, fourteen's plenty old enough to start smoking. Though mind you, if I had a boy and he was going to smoke, well, I'd rather he smoked before my face than behind my back.'

I did not know what to say to this. My father would have lynched me if he had caught me with a cigarette. Thinking like that about my father made me remember. I said: 'I think I'd better hurry with the milk.'

'Oh, yes.' He took up my jug. 'Will you be calling again tomorrow, then?'

It seemed to matter to him, somehow, that I should come again. 'Yes, I expect so.'

He went around the counter and opened the door for me before giving me the jug. 'So long, then, Frank.'

I walked slowly away with the milk. When I got to the corner past the fruit shop I turned; he was still standing there, on the steps of the dairy.

My mother was not angry when I got home.

'They've given you good measure,' she said.

Next morning I was up early, and took the jug from the kitchen before my mother was awake. When I got to the High Street I saw by the clock in the watchmaker's window that it was only a quarter to seven, but the dairy was open, and the man was on his hands and knees scrubbing the black and white tiled floor. The smell of soap mingled with the smells of cheese and bacon.

'You're early, Frank.' He sat back on his heels to look at me. 'You must be a good getter-up.' He was in shirt

sleeves, and had no collar on. The shirt was open almost to his waist and I could see that his chest was very thin, the skin white, like dough. 'What did you do with yourself yesterday?'

'I went to the Burns,' I said. 'For tiddlers.'

'Get any?'

'A few.'

'Ah.' He looked at my arms and legs. 'You've caught the sun nicely.'

'My father made me throw them out,' I said. 'The tiddlers. He wouldn't let me have them in the house.' I did not tell him that I had cried.

His face went suddenly crimson; the cloth he was holding began to shed water on the floor. After a moment he noticed the water and began to swab it up, wringing the cloth out into the bucket, then: 'Ever been rabbitting, Frank?'

'No. I'd like to go, though.'

'Ah, grand sport it is. You'd need a gun, of course.' He sat up on his heels, looked out through the open doorway. 'If I had a boy I'd take him out rabbitting. Certainly. I'd get him a little gun, a four-ten, maybe, and away we'd go, together, just the two of us. I'd show him all the best places. Or I might get him a two-two, maybe. Grand sport, that. Lying in the hedgerows waiting for Brer Rabbit to come out. Ah, lovely. Evening's the best time.' He looked out through the doorway for a long time, then began to attack the floor again, making quick, vigorous movements with the cloth until the tiles were gleaming.

When he had finished he wrung out the cloth and took the bucket away behind the counter. He wiped his hands and rolled down his sleeves before coming back to take my jug. 'Same again, is it, Frank? Two pints?'

I said, yes, but he made no move to go. Instead, he leaned against the counter to look at me. 'What are you going to be when you grow up, Frank?'

'I have to be a magistrate's clerk, like my father.'

'Have to be? Who says so?'

'My father. He says I have to be one. I don't want to be. I want to be an officer on a ship, like my uncle.'

'I see.' The man's face looked sad again, and for a long time he did not speak, then: 'Perhaps things'll change, Frank, and you won't have to be a magistrate's clerk. You'll see. Things'll get better as you grow up. You'll grow big, most likely, and then you'll be able to please yourself about it. I wouldn't worry too much, Frank.'

There was a long companionable silence between us. At my back the door was still opened wide, and the street was beginning to come to life. Doors opened and closed; people began to move about inside the houses, their slippered feet lipping across canvassed floors; the newly washed tiles of the dairy gleamed wetly in the morning sun. In the silence I watched its light creep slowly towards the counter, and then I saw, outlined against the lace-curtained door leading into the shop, the tall, thin figure of the woman.

The man said: 'Have you got any brothers or sisters, Frank?'

For a long moment I could not speak. My mind was busy with the thought that the woman had been watching us for some time. There was a still, silent menace in the outline of her form.

'There's somebody there,' I said at last.

A change came over his face as he looked up. It did not start. It did not frown. I am sure that, outwardly, it did not move. The change came from within him. It was as if the light and the warmth of his nature died away inside

him, until I was left looking only at a thin little man with grey hair and a scrawny neck. He took up my jug, moved away towards the door.

I stayed where I was, unmoving until he returned with the milk. As he came back into the shop I watched the doorway behind him; there was nothing to see. He put down the jug upon the counter and pushed it towards me. 'Got to hurry now, Frank. Very busy today. See you tomorrow, then.'

But I did not see him next day, for then I left the town with my family, and we stayed at the seaside three weeks: it was August when we returned. No rain had fallen in all that time and the town was hot, now, every surface in it painful to the touch. The people in the town were tired, weary of the dry, exhausting heat; when they stood together to talk their figures drooped, and their voices were flat, and listless. The gossips at the corners of the streets looked often at the sky.

It was afternoon when I went to the dairy again. It was cool in there, cold, even. The bell rang loud across its silence until I closed the door; as it died away its note was echoed by the gentle hum of the metal chest. I waited for a long time, watching the inner door.

The man came out into the shop. He seemed paler, greyer than when I had seen him last, but as he moved inside the counter to where I stood I knew that he was pleased to see me. His eyes looked up and down my body, slowly over my sun-browned arms and legs. He stopped as he came opposite me; his body was bent forward, somewhat, his head inclined to one side, and in his eyes was an expression I had seen in the eyes of my mother when I had done something which pleased her. He looked at me like

this for what seemed a long time, and then the corners of his mouth curled upward in a smile.

There was a movement behind him. I turned to see the woman outlined in the doorway. Her face was thin, and white, and ghostly; her short, dull black hair was brushed back from her forehead and pinned at the nape of her neck. Her cheeks were sunken, her lips lacked colour or shape.

'A pint of milk, please,' I said. It seemed as if I shouted, so loud did the words sound on the icy silence.

She stared at me from the great, dark hollows of her eyes. One bony hand moved to her throat, caught at the woollen cardigan she wore over a thick, black dress.

'Just one pint.' My voice was loud, urgent. I could not help it. I think that by shouting I hoped to shatter the tension which was enveloping me.

'Yes,' said the man, 'just one pint.' He took my jug and moved away. Slowly, very gradually, I edged towards the door, stood there with my back to it.

I watched the floor. For an eternity I watched the floor, my eyes tracing a path along the edges of its squares: along the black, up the white, up the black, along the white, up, down, up down, up . . .

The woman was still in the top, left hand corner of my view. I knew that she watched me, but I could not look up. I shifted my weight, first on to one leg, then to the other. I looked at the butter, at the lard, at the bacon machine. At last, compelled by my fear, I looked at the woman.

She had not moved. She stared at me. For a long time there was no movement anywhere, and then, slowly, her bloodless lips moved back into the hollows of her cheeks. It was a smile like the grin of a corpse. I felt the hair rise

on the back of my neck, and suddenly I knew that I was screaming, screaming with terror, but screaming inside myself. My voice was still silent, my mouth was still shut.

In a moment the man was opposite me. He held out the jug. I took it from his fingers, and hurried from the shop.

Next day my mother called me in from the garden, where I was playing. She had a basket in her hand, and in the bottom of the basket lay a slip of paper, neatly folded.

'From the dairy,' she said. 'I've written everything down on the paper.' She put twopence into my hand. 'You can get some sweets for yourself.'

I did not want to go again into the dairy, and for a long time after I left the house I stayed in the lane that led on to the High Street. I needed the twopence, badly, but it meant nothing beside my terror of the woman. I wondered if I dared to go back and tell my mother that I was afraid, but then I realized that she might tell my father. My father said he that was afraid of nothing, and I knew that I could not explain my fear to him.

Suddenly it dawned on me that I had no jug, and that there could be no milk on the order. That meant, of course, that the man would not have to leave the shop to fetch the milk, and so I could not be left alone with the woman. I walked on again, turning the two pennies over and over in my pocket. I began to worry about what I should do if only the woman were in the shop, and not the man, but when I got to the dairy they were both of them present.

They looked up as I entered, but for some time neither made a move towards me. I knew that they had been talking about me before I came in, and after a moment the woman looked directly across at the man. He made no move. I stood for a long time before she came down to

where I stood. The corners of her mouth were turned down; from under her grey woollen cardigan she put out a long, thin hand to take the paper I held out to her. The hand was white, bony, transparent almost; the nails were bitten down to the quick, and around them the tips of her fingers were red and swollen.

'Cheese,' she read from the paper, 'and butter. Two pounds each.' Her voice was cold, flat, lifeless as the marble fittings.

The man moved over towards the cheese. There was a long, thin wire hanging beside it on a nail, its ends coiled tightly around small toggles of wood. He took the toggles into his hands and threw the wire deftly over the cheese, guiding it up gently, swiftly, until it was only an inch or two from the top of the cylinder. His hands were crossed over his chest, and as he uncrossed them the wire bit deep into the cheese, slicing off a disc about three inches wide. From this he cut a smaller piece, throwing the wire above the cylinder and pulling it sharply down towards his waist. He took a cloth and wiped clean the wire, hung it back in its place before putting the cheese on the scales. The needle steadied at exactly two pounds; he smiled shyly across at me.

'Lard, two pounds,' said woman, and, when he had weighed that out: 'Butter, two pounds.' She did not move.

The man wrapped up the cheese, and the butter, and the lard. He gave me a dozen eggs from the basket in the window, and placed them all in the basket that I carried. As I left the shop I had difficulty with the door: the bell rang loudly until I closed it behind me. As I hurried past the window I could see the thin, dark shape of the woman behind the curtain, and I knew that she watched me.

The day after that I had to go again to the dairy. For

ham, this time. It was almost teatime, and I knew that the woman would be there again. As I walked down the garden towards the gate I saw that my sister was awake; the covers of her pram were thrown back, and her fat little legs were sawing at the air. It gave me an idea. I called back to my mother: 'Can I take Margaret?'

She thought about it, then: 'If you're very careful.'

I eased Margaret up into a sitting position and pushed the pram towards the dairy. When I got there I put on the brake of the pram and went quickly inside. The man and the woman were both there, and I stopped in the doorway, the bell ringing furiously.

'Half a pound of ham,' I shouted. 'I can't come in. I have to watch the pram.' I pointed at the pram, shut the door from outside.

Then I began to feel foolish and confused. I wondered if they would take any notice of me, or if I would have to go back inside the shop to repeat my order. For a long time nothing happened. I strained to see behind the curtain at the back of the window. I dared not go back, and began to feel sick with fear. Then, quite suddenly, the door opened, and the man was standing on the step, my purchase in his hand.

He closed the door behind him, came shyly down the steps on to the pavement. 'Is this your little sister, Frank?' He looked reproachful. 'You didn't tell me you had a little sister.'

'I have another one at home,' I said: 'Maureen.'

'Maureen.' He spoke the name quietly, went towards the pram.

'No, this one is Margaret. Maureen's the other one.'

'Ah, Margaret.' He put out a hand and touched her on the cheek. She smiled, showing both teeth. 'Margaret,' he

said. 'Margaret.' He stroked her face and she made a gentle, crooning noise. 'She's beautiful, beautiful.' He looked away. 'If I'd had a little girl I would have called her Judith. Judith's a beautiful name. It would go well with John, eh? John and Judith.' He looked away down the High Street, and for a long time he did not speak, then: 'John and Judith. Or Judith and John. Yes, Judith and John.' After a while he bent down on one knee beside the pram. He stroked the chubby calf of Margaret's leg, and took her toes between his fingers. 'Chooky choo,' he said. 'Chooky chooky choo . . .'

My sister laughed. She had a merry, throaty, fat baby's laugh, but he did not laugh back at her. Slowly I realized that he was no longer looking at her. I followed his gaze towards the window of the shop, where the woman peeped out through parted curtains. Malice was in her sunken eyes, contempt in the curl of her bloodless lips.

'I'll have to be going,' I said.

Next day the milkman came back on his round, and I did not have to go any more to the dairy.

The storm came halfway through September. For days before it came the sky had been like a sheet of molten brass, and the town was shrivelled in the heat, the paint-work on doors and windows rising in ugly blisters, the tar on the roads running liquid into the gutters. The streets were bare of people until evening, and in the churches there were prayers for rain.

When the cloud came into the sky the people came out to see it. All over the town windows and doors were opened, and necks craned to see the cloud. Voices were raised as neighbour called to neighbour; old men smiled wisely, and forecast rain.

The cloud stayed over the town. In the evening it was

joined by another, and then another, and then a wind rose and the sky was filled with cloud, white cloud, grey cloud, blue cloud, rippling and scudding and bubbling across the sky like froth until, towards sunset, it stopped. Then the sky was red, and yellow and mauve and green and brown and purple, and in the east it became black, and as the darkness reached out towards the sun the first blinding flashes of light came, and the first thunder began to growl distantly at first, then coming nearer, nearer to the town. The first rain fell coldly, vertically, in drops as big as pennies.

I ran home when the rain came. My mother sat there in darkness; every light was out, every window open. Great, jagged prongs of lightning ripped across the sky; the air was close, electric, stilling perspiration. The rain beat down, drumming in fury against the pavements, and the thunder roared growing louder, louder, until the earth seemed to tremble at its noise.

And then, quite suddenly, it ceased: the thunder, the lightning, and, more gradually, the rain. And the moon came up and a wind rose with it, sweeping the summer out of the town.

The morning after the storm the town was cold and the roads were hard again, and after breakfast I put on my skates and went on to the High Street. I stayed at the end of the street and got myself used to the feel of the skates again, and when I felt sure of myself I did some figures of eight, forward at first, and then in reverse. When I looked up I saw a woman beckoning me from the edge of the pavement.

‘Man wants you,’ she said. ‘Down there.’

The man stood on the steps of the dairy. I went down to the shop, let him lead me inside. At the door I paused

to take off my skates, but he shook his head.

'No need, Frank.' His voice was low, scarcely audible. 'She's not here any more.' I had to strain to hear him. His face was grey, bearded with stubble. 'It was the storm,' he said. 'The storm did it.' He walked away from me, behind the counter, came quickly around it to face me again. 'Frank,' he said. He leaned over towards me.

I went over to him then, my skates ringing loudly on the tiles of the floor, but he did not speak. Twice he opened his mouth as if to say something, but each time turned away again. There was a silence lasting several minutes, then: 'Your father's a magistrate, Frank, isn't he?'

'He's a magistrate's clerk.'

'Ah, well, something like that, then.' He lowered his face on to his hands, looked at me gravely for a while, up, and down, up, and down. His eyes were red rimmed. He moved his hands through his hair, and then slowly, roughly over his face, as if he were washing it. At last he gave me a tired sort of smile. 'Wait here a minute, will you?'

He went away through the door at the back of the shop; it seemed a long time before he came back again. He stood in the doorway, then, and looked across at me, his hands hanging limply by his sides; then slowly he came towards me, holding out a letter. 'Give this to your father, Frank. Will he be in? Tell him I'll wait.'

'Yes.' I took the note and hurried from the shop. I caught my father just as he was leaving the house. He scowled at me, put on his spectacles and tore open the envelope, then: 'Good God!' he said. 'Good God! Good God!' He took me roughly by the arm and led me inside. Calling my mother he told her: 'Don't let this child out of your sight.'

‘What is it?’

‘Something’s happened at the dairy.’

Then I saw his lips forming the word.

‘Murder,’ he said.

But I did get out of the house again. I reached the High Street just before the van came, with the police in it. They were a long time inside the dairy, and soon the pavement outside the shop was filled with people. I stayed on the other side of the street, and waited; I wondered if the policeman would handcuff him, or if they would tie him up with ropes. Then I saw the door open, and two policemen came out and moved back the crowd.

They had not handcuffed him. When he came out he paused for a moment in the doorway, and looked down on the crowd. He had shaved, and wore his collar and his tie, and had his coat on. As he stood there, looking about him, it seemed that he had a dignity and a bearing that he had never had before. I wept then. There was complete silence in the little street as all eyes turned on him, and then a woman called out shrilly: ‘Murderer!’

Others took up the cry, and the policemen drew their truncheons; those beside the man took his arms and led him out to the vehicle. Then, with one foot on its step, he turned to the crowd.

‘Not murderer,’ he said. ‘I didn’t kill her. She was dead long ago.’

The crowd murmured.

‘Dead long ago,’ he shouted. ‘She never came to life.’ He climbed up into the van, cried down at the crowd: ‘Never came to life. Do you understand? Never came to life. Never! Never! Never! You don’t know what it did to me!’

The policemen climbed in after him and shut the door, and the van drew away. For some time after it had turned the corner the crowd stood still, and then, slowly, it moved off along the street. Some of the people walked past me, as I leaned against the wall, and I heard one say: 'I wonder how he did it.'

For a little while I wondered about this, myself, and then I remembered what he had said about the storm. And I saw him, then, quite clearly, amid the thunder and the lightning and the rain, going over to the cheese, where the wire hung beside it on the nail. And I saw him take its toggles in his hands, walk swiftly towards the woman, his arms crossed high above his chest.

For a long time afterwards the dairy stood empty, and we never went near it to play. Then, when the spring came round again we took to skating past it once more, leaping from the road on to the pavement outside the shop. I was always afraid when I did this. In the autumn the dairy was taken over by a firm of multiple grocers. They rebuilt the front of the shop and used the back and upstairs for storage. I don't think anybody ever lived in it again.

HENRY L. JAMES

The Fringe of Darkness

MARTIN had come here to die — or to be killed. The choice was simple. The choice was his own. But it was the will of the People.

Now, with four hours to live, was the time of judgement. There had once been the comfort of God but that comfort had been only a procrastination — a belief in a judgement *after* death. For Martin, nothing lay ahead. In four hours, or less, he would revert to the Immaculate Zero, the final euphemism in the Age of Omega.

God, after all, had obscured the reality. He had been the present bribe for which Man had mortgaged the future. The People had been right to reject Him. He might have eased Martin's final hours but He would have changed Martin. He would have forced forgiveness on Martin. There could have been no bitterness. Martin would have had to love the People who had caged his body and would shortly extinguish his spirit. Instead, he hated the People. And he would die hating them. He gloried in his hatred.

The fringe of darkness in which he lived had thrown a new light on his contracting world. The smooth blank walls of the cell were his horizon; the hard cot his refuge; the two metres from cot to table were his estate; the single blazing light point in the ceiling, just beyond reach, was his sun. He had no moon; the light point was never switched off.

On the table lay his only way out. A tiny capsule, amber-coloured, transparent, almost attractive — and,

inside, the lethal dose. He could place it between his teeth. Then — one snap. Safe, immediate, guaranteed, recommended by reputable members of the medical profession and the Euthanasia Society: money refunded if —

God would never have allowed this. His Bishops, while England was Christian, would never permit it. Death at the hands of the State was death judicial — and, with repentance, you might rejoin your God; but death by your own hand to escape the Electrode would mean exile from divinity and everlasting flames. The imagery was picturesque and the philosophy called itself humane. Christianity itself had been drug enough with which to face eternity. But Martin had not got to face eternity, only a few hours. And bitterness was a sufficient fuel for his waning spirit.

Martin had been sentenced to death 300 years before; no — more. Three thousand, 6,000 years before. He was doomed to die when Shem, Ham and Japheth divided the Earth. For Man, granted a multi-coloured world, had since, seen himself only in black and white and yellow.

There had had been wars of ideologies, religion, attrition, economics, philosophies, passion, aspiration, and wars of habit. In turn, they had exhausted themselves until a fresh grouping of powers had made another war imperative. But not until the twentieth century had what then had been called World Wars begun, and these set the scene for the greatest conflict of them all. It had lasted for 300 years — the Racial War, Martin's War.

In the middle of the twentieth century, Man stood poised. The world, breathless after years of war, grasped for peace. There was universal acceptance of basic prin-

ciples of tolerance. The moment of truth came — and went. Charters of human rights were drawn up and scrapped to serve a propagandist purpose. The Atom dominated power politics. Those without faith bomb-happily accepted the living moment. Those with faith lived in fear. Fear became mistrust. Mistrust — suppression. Suppression bred hatred — and war.

The conflicting ideologies each developed atomic weapons — but neither dared to use them. Research for even greater weapons of destruction became futile. Victory would go to those with greater endurance not to those with the greater offensive power. Here the Atom was useless. It could only be used dramatically for destruction.

And the greater evil grew. Restrictions were focused on weak majorities and dangerous minorities. Racial intolerance had always stained the façade of civilisation. Now, more and more, active persecution came into the open.

In Africa, the white man, fearing the political awakening of the native, imposed restrictions as futile as a boulder on the lip of the Victoria Falls and as dangerous as a loose cap on a depth charge. The Christian world was sanctimoniously shocked but, with eyes on the strategic present, governments failed to see the danger as the floodgates controlling racial hatred weakened. And finally cracked.

The Great War of Ideologies ended with the rising all over the world of the coloured peoples.

Thoughts of world domination were banished in a rear-guard action for mere existence. The battle ebbed and flowed. Minorities were interned or fought over. Whole populations shifted. Yet, somehow, the veneer of democracy survived.

In the twenty-second century, England followed other western countries in abandoning Christianity. It was not

out-lawed. It had simply become untenable by logical minds. The discovery of a numerical key to the universe — a prime number which linked energy, mass and distance of the planets, first hinted at in the twentieth century — had sealed the doom of any philosophy appealing to the heart or conscience. Christianity became the refuge of the emotional and neurotic. There was no State religion. The People became the Word; the State became God. The last Anno Domini was 2178 and the People, somewhat cynically — as the life of Earth was now mathematically computable — called the succeeding years the Years of Omega.

Martin had been born in London in what was virtually a Police State. He had in childhood endured the petty cruelties that only children can inflict. He had found solace in his books. But his education had been cut short by peremptory legislation which decreed for all time his place in society and his role in a controlled economy. His race was not to be trusted. They were to supply the pool of unskilled labour needed by the country to complete its reconstruction.

But Martin was a natural student. He was reconciled to physical labour. The fact that he was what they tauntingly called One of the Educated Ones made the little persecutions harder to bear. But all he asked of life — all he could hope for — was a bare subsistence and a room to follow his studies.

‘Is that Hampstead 4368?’ he asked.

‘That’s right.’

‘You advertised a room.’

‘That’s right.’

'Has it gone?'

'No,' said the voice.

'Could I come along and see it?'

'Any time.' The voice was cordial.

Martin climbed the hill beside the Heath and checked the numbers on the line of apartment houses in bomb-chipped ferro-concrete. He looked down on the bowl of London lying between the heights of Hampstead and the Surrey Hills. The Thames reflected the sunlight as it flowed sluggishly between the two main elevated roads on its banks, the smooth concrete runways interrupted from time to time by temporary bridges and flanked by uniform single-storey buildings with occasional burnt-edged gaps like decaying teeth. The dome of St Paul's, cracked and pancaked to the ground, could be seen in the distance with tourists crawling over it like flies.

He rang the bell. The door was opened by a large man in a brightly coloured shirt and tight trousers. When he saw Martin, his huge welcoming grin switched to a scowl.

'What d'you want?' he demanded.

'You had a room to let,' said Martin.

'Not to you,' grunted the man and slammed the door.

It opened again as Martin walked away. 'Are you the bastard that 'phoned?' yelled the man.

'Yes.'

'Well, keep away from round here. We don't want you or your pals. Get the hell out of it.'

Shortly after this the Government took a hand. Martin was not hated for what he had done — a new generation was springing up which had not fought in the general war — but for what he was. Segregation was necessary — as much for the sake of the blacks as for the whites — and

a policy of Apartheid was enforced. The archaic word was resurrected.

Many were still in labour camps in the north. They manned the heavy industries. The most damaged areas of London, where accommodation was already strained, were now set aside as great compounds for the others, including Martin. There was a building programme for these areas but no labour to spare for anything but residential buildings in Mayfair and for government buildings near the vast subterranean honeycomb of offices called the Palace of Westminster.

There was a rigid curfew. Martin had to be in his compound — in Stepney — by seven. To be found outside after hours meant summary conviction and an immediate flogging. There was no appeal. There could be no appeal. Absence from the compound was either fact or it was not — the white-helmeted constable's word was sufficient evidence — and there were absolutely no acceptable reasons for it.

Martin was one of a gang of labourers on the site of what had once been the British Museum. They were laying the foundations of a new building and the debris of the ruined Museum had to be cleared before excavations could begin. Nothing was to be preserved. But since its destruction the Museum had been open to looters for more than a century and little was, in fact, found — an occasional piece of anonymous statuary, an arm or a torso; some odd over-ornate drapes and, once, among a pile of crumbled stones, Martin's pick turned over a piece of a plaque bearing the single word — 'Elgin.' He wondered idly what it was.

Then, one day, a pressure drill broke through to an unexpected cache — a deep, lead-lined tomb filled with

books; books perfectly preserved, part of the original library which, Martin dimly recalled, had been one of the greatest in the world. It had been broken up years before. Only the technical library had been kept. The rest had been burned.

Martin was one of the first inside, and knew at once that he had never seen books like these before. His scholar's instinct yearned for them.

'Keep back there. Don't touch them.' The harsh voice of the ganger barked out as Martin stretched out his hand to the racks.

'But—' he said.

'Get back. D'you hear?' The ganger pushed Martin aside and scanned the spines of the books. 'Hamlet,' 'The Canterbury Tales,' 'Paradise Lost' was all Martin had time to read before the command snapped out — 'Burn them!'

'Oh no!' gasped Martin in horror.

'Burn them,' said the ganger. 'If we dig 'em out we'll take a week. Burn 'em where they are.'

'But you can't do that—'

'Burn the blasted things. Get on with it,' the ganger turned away. On an impulse, Martin seized a couple of books and thrust them beneath his windcheater. He followed the ganger out. He helped to pour paraffin over the books and stood by in agony to watch them burn.

He knew he could never get the books — *his* books — off the site. He would be searched as he left, a routine precaution against looting. At best he would escape with a fine. But he feared most the loss of the books. He wanted them above all. They belonged to another age. He had never seen such bindings. He did not even know what books he had taken and dared not so much as peep at

them under the ganger's watchful eye. He longed to get them to the sanctuary of his tiny room in the compound. There was only one chance. He must hide them now and find some means of getting them out another day. His pick etched out a small cavity in what was left of the main wall. He thrust the books inside and covered them with a heavy slab of masonry.

'We'll blast that wall tomorrow,' said the ganger.

'It'll come away with picks,' said Martin, desperately,

'Take a bloody year. They built to last in those days. We'll blast it tomorrow.'

So it had to be that night. He would have to break the curfew. There would be only a single guard on the site. The difficulty would be to avoid the street patrols. It would be dangerous. But he could not abandon the books.

It had been easier than he expected. The area known as the City was largely derelict. It was not until Ludgate Hill that he saw the first posse of blackclad police. The powerful presses of the *British Journal* — the only newspaper, printed by the People's Stationery Office — churned away in Fleet Street and drowned the noise of Martin's footsteps as he struck north through the open spaces of Lincoln's Inn. The fence round the site was easily climbed as the guard drowsed over his electric heater. The books were still there and in a matter of moments Martin had started the journey home.

His luck held. Several patrols passed, but he saw them in good time. The friendly noise of Fleet Street again covered his progress and he was soon at St Paul's. From there it should be easy. The patrols were rare. The labyrinth of burnt-out streets and desolate basements was scarcely worth patrolling at all. It sheltered the odd

vagrant and a few deserters. But there were few passers-by now, after the hour of curfew — why should anyone want to go east at that time?

‘Got any grub?’ A dim figure loomed up. A shabby, dirty, emaciated figure with the light of despair in his eyes. Martin stopped.

‘Sorry — no,’ he said.

The man was obviously a refugee, probably political. His clothes bore the same identifying maltese cross that Martin was forced to wear, the sign of caste, the brand of ostracism.

‘I’ve got to get food,’ said the man.

‘I haven’t got any.’

‘Money then.’

‘I’ve none.’ Martin had emptied his pockets before leaving.

‘You bastard. I need help, I tell you.’

‘I just can’t help you,’ said Martin, with pity in his voice.

A demented look flashed into the man’s eyes and he lunged forward. Martin caught a glimpse of a blade and parried the blow. But he was caught off balance and fell. The man struck again and again. Martin heard a whistle in the distance and the sound of running. Desperately, he threw the man off and stood up. There were sounds now in all directions. Whichever way he went he would run into a patrol. In an instinct of self-preservation, he took the books and threw them as far as possible.

The cold voice of the Clerk of the Court intoned. ‘You are charged with sedition and conspiracy against the People. Do you plead guilty or not guilty?’

‘Not guilty,’ said Martin.

But he knew it was hopeless. The Public Prosecutor

produced witness after witness giving irrefutable evidence which could add up to one thing only. It was pitilessly logical, relentless as a mathematical formula, reducing Martin to the Immaculate Zero.

He went into the witness box and told his story baldly.

'You would call yourself er — an educated man?' asked the Prosecutor, with a hint of mockery.

'Yes.'

'You are a labourer?'

'Yes.'

'But you imagine yourself worthy of something better?'

'Yes.'

'But you *are* a labourer.'

'You can see my complexion,' said Martin bitterly.

The Prosecutor shrugged. 'As an educated man, had you heard of John Milton?'

'Vaguely, yes.'

'Vaguely? Who was he?'

'A poet.'

'And—?'

'I believe, a pamphleteer.'

'You believe. You had stolen two books?'

Martin hesitated. 'I found two books,' he said.

'One of these was by John Milton,' the Prosecutor paused. '—the *Arcopagitica*.'

'Was it?'

'You did not know?'

'No.'

The Public Prosecutor leaned forward. 'Do you know what the *Arcopagitica* is?' he asked.

'No.'

'You are quite sure of that?'

'Quite sure.'

'Does it surprise you to learn that it is a subversive attack by an unscrupulous propagandist against any form of censorship?' The Prosecutor's voice rose as though he were indicting Milton himself.

'But it is centuries old!'

'Do you approve of the People's ordinance which at present controls the published and spoken word — the censorship, in fact, which protects the regime?'

Martin was stung. 'You see my complexion.'

'Do you or do you not?'

'How could I?'

'Do you or do you not?'

'No.'

The Prosecutor directed a glance at the three-man jury. 'You were arrested with a man called—' he consulted his notes, 'Edward Baillie.'

'Was I?'

'You did not know?'

'Not at the time.'

'Why did you meet him?' asked the Prosecutor.

'I did not.' The Prosecutor raised an eyebrow. 'I mean I had not arranged to meet him.'

'It was an—accidental encounter?' asked the Prosecutor, sarcastically.

'Yes.'

'You did not know that Edward Baillie had escaped from custody while awaiting trial on charges of sedition and armed threats against the People? That he is, in fact, a traitorous renegade?'

'No.'

'You ask the jury to believe that you met this notorious agitator entirely by accident, and that you happened -- quite by chance, and unknown to yourself -- to be

carrying with you literature — propaganda — damaging to the Authority of the People? Why then did you try to throw away the book when you were arrested . . . ?

'The People v. Martin' droned on, inexorably. Martin knew the end. They meant to get him anyway. His colour demanded that.

And when the Judge donned the black cap and uttered the formula: ' . . . to another place and be put to death by the Electrode, in the name of the People,' Martin was reconciled to all except his own bitterness.

He had never been aware of bitterness before. It must have been there. It must have been cloaked by caution. He had tried to live with his persecutors, to adapt himself to the inevitability of humiliation and degradation. But now there was no need to hide his hatred.

It would last until his death — and beyond. His mind, racing against time, paused in its flight. Beyond? There was nothing. But he *wanted* his hatred to go on. Could this be? If there were God it could be. But there *was* no God — only a mathematical equation. If there were God his hatred would continue in the mind and memory of God. As he, himself, would. As would a mathematical equation.

He could not now believe in a God of Love: it was too late. But he could perhaps accept a God of Hate. There was comfort in this, and despair, too. He found himself on his knees mouthing an almost incoherent supplication to hate his enemies. If he *had* found God he had found him in the wrong way and for the wrong reason. But did that matter as long as he had found God?

His hand, brushing the hair from his damp brow, touched the shaven patch, prepared for the electrode. His glance fell on the capsule. He picked it up. He heard the

hiss of the hydraulic lock on his cell door. They were coming for him.

Frantically, he clutched the capsule. *Was* there a God? He threw the capsule hard against the wall and stood up, 'I hate you, you bastards,' he said, aloud, 'and I shall always hate you.'

And God will hate you, too, he thought, as the door opened. I am His. Although my skin is white.

G. M. MACGREGOR

The Small Experiment

THE old woman lay where she had fallen in a corner of the underground shelter, and pain and fear branched and budded in her mind. She had been there since the sirens began early in the afternoon and now it was almost dark in the world above her head. She was only an old, an unimportant woman, living by herself on a stony acre some way beyond the town's perimeter, but the Administration, regardless of expense, had sent men to build a shelter for her own use so that she would not have to run to the town gates as fast as her old legs would carry her whenever the sirens sounded. They had dug and tunnelled and built it with care and precision and it was a very fine little shelter indeed, with the standard green light-bulb and the Administration's specially designed clock snug in its iron cage and telling the seconds with a whiplash tick.

That was perhaps six months ago, no more, but to the woman it seemed that there had never been a time in her life when the sirens and the hours in the green-lit shelter and the headlong rush to be underground had not been with her. She had to be underground until the sirens stopped because of an order signed by the Chief of Police of the Fourth District — of that she was quite sure. Of the reason for the order she was less sure, although it had been explained to her often enough by the men of the patrol who stabbed their blunt fingers against a flapping paper and shouted at her, thinking she was deaf when she was only uncomprehending. It had something to do with the

squat toadstool cluster of buildings behind the barbed wire in the forest clearing, and the chemists and the scientists who, they said, worked there under the black chimney that showed above the trees. And she knew that every time the sirens hurried and pursued her into the shelter the same thing was happening in every corner of the town — the same blind rush out of houses and down into the waiting vaults where the green lights shone and the clocks cracked out the divisions of interminable hours.

At first, in the town, the shelters had eddied and swirled with arguments and speculation. Men, reading the vague phrases to which the Chief of Police had added his signature and his precise penalties for disobedience, had talked of the forest buildings, of chemical warfare, of bacterial warfare, of radio-activity, of the testing of lethal gases — and each man had worried what meaning he could out of the two words, 'Emergency' and 'Experiments' that were on every wall. The quick bullets that met the first to run in panic from a shelter while the sirens still sounded were not, however, subject to any argument at all.

Nowadays there was less panic and what there was could usually be contained underground, but sometimes especially at night, a man might still fancy he caught the smell of gas, and his terror would burst like a rocket and shower its sparks on all his neighbours. Then there would be a rush and a trample and screams that would bring the hobnailed guards running to the manholes, where, encased in the grotesque anonymity of masks and rubber tubes, they would threaten with muffled words until the wave of panic had ebbed back and back into silence. After the sirens had ended, but not until then, the stretcher parties would go where it was necessary.

But there was less of that as time went on, and the

people made some shift to take the shelters and the lights and the clocks into their lives, transmuting the bizarre into the familiar. It was the sirens they never learned to accept, the sirens that leapt upon them by day, by night, at work, at worship, for ten minutes, for an afternoon — howling and moaning from hidden cyries, skewering their nerves until they could tumble into the nearest shelter where at least there was the acceptance of the common lot.

No two alarms were ever quite the same. The sirens could be varied in pitch from a whine to a rasping snarl. Sometimes they would be continuous, sometimes intermittent, and sometimes, like the cat withdrawing its paw, they would stop just long enough for the people to venture to the surface and breathe the stale air out of their lungs, then strike again with a new and rending urgency.

Had it not been for the sirens, then, they might have dealt with the situation as the oyster deals with the irritant lodged in its shell. But the sirens stood apart and conducted a dark malevolent life of their own, as inscrutable as the eyes of death, as unpredictable as the action of a dream. And through time it became quite usual for men to hear sirens in their minds even in the sunny quiet of an untortured afternoon, or to awake in the dark with a shriek sounding in their ears and lie shuddering away the slow night hours. Soon some began to lose the ability to tell the real from the false and went about in a dull confusion, trusting every sound in their phantom world, or trusting no sound at all. So the sirens, sleeping, had yet their unrecorded victories, and the statistics brought daily to the Chief of Police were, had he known it, woefully inexact.

But for the old woman outside the town, housed privately under the earth by the benevolence of the

Administration, fear had another face. Here speculation did not trouble her, nor the contagion of frenzy, nor the thought of mutilation or disease. Here the sirens were more remote and somehow sad. They spoke to her with the voices of the lost; they yearned and grieved along the borderlands, forever beating on doors that would never open. Today as every day they brought to her the remembered terror and loneliness of the child's recurring dream, and she was a girl again in the white-painted iron bedstead under the mossy slates, running in sleep down corridors dark and endless, on and on between the high walls, followed by thundering footsteps and the boom and echo of the pursuer's voice.

But today the dream was suddenly different, and she saw that she was running towards a pinpoint of light that grew brighter and brighter as she stumbled on. She knew that if she should reach it the corridor would end all at once and the light would encompass her. Faster and faster she ran, on towards the only gate possible and the only place where the sirens had no dominion.

In the house of the Chief of Police of the Fourth District it was warm and the room smelled of apples. He had a visitor this evening, a man from North-East Security, a small ferrety man who owed much to patronage. The Chief of Police sat by the window, his olive uniform immaculate, the trouser-creases sword-edged, and he polished his nails gently with a velvet pad, talking abstractedly and weighing the courtesies in his voice like a grudging grocer. From time to time he parted the curtains and looked through the double glass and the iron grille, out and down over the darkening town where the sirens whooped and screamed and where the people had drawn the world

over their heads like a blanket. He watched the emptiness and the lamp-post shadows on the wet courtyard and the stockstill shadow of the armed man at the gate rigid in his pool of darkness.

At last he rose, smiling, depressed a switch and spoke to the First Secretary of the Administration.

'The sirens may stop for today,' he said. 'Give the usual orders.'

'So the danger is over?' asked the man from North-East Security.

'Danger?' said the Chief of Police languidly. 'There was no danger. Not today. Not any day.'

'But the experiments? And the research station in the forest?'

'There are no experiments and the buildings in the forest are empty. There is, of course,' he added, 'my own small experiment, but that is not what you had in mind . . .'

'You must realize,' continued the Chief of Police as he sat down and began again to polish his nails, 'You must realize that none of these things you mention is in itself necessary. It is only necessary that there should be fear.'

WILL MARKALL

The Sun Bathed In The Sky

THE BEACH was covered with fine sand the colour of putty, and the boy's feet made cups of heat in it as he ran down to the sea's edge. There he paused, the lapping waves of that almost tideless sea a warm caress on his sunburned legs. When Miss Flory was not watching, as he hoped she would not be, he intended to swim out to the wreck of a wooden ship, across which the slow waves washed, not more than fifty yards out.

Exercising a caution gained by long experience of Miss Flory, he lay meanwhile in the shallows, allowing the ripples to wash up and down his tanned body, his head protected from the all-powerful sun by a thick shock of hair. A charmed circle of no more than a few hundred-weight of sand, and a few gallons of salt water, made him blissfully happy. And there was always the wreck. He was looking forward to that.

The sun bathed in the sky, luxurious, burning; one hand, as it were, trailed down and touched all mortal life, with fingers that were Arabian. Like lizards on the lizard-long and lizard-bright promontory, a stone's throw away, a group of bathers from the hotel lay almost moveless, engaged in desultory conversation.

Not far from them, higher up the beach, sat Miss Flory. She waved to him, and he waved back, with the assurance of a seven-year old who had plans of his own. He saw Chalmers, the morose fat man who watched over his safety, as Miss Flory over his general well-being. Chalmers approached slowly, to talk to her, and the boy knew that

his moment of escape was coming soon, if it was to come at all.

'What's the matter, old girl?' said Chalmer's voice in her ear. 'Got belly-ache?'

'Don't call me "old girl",' said Miss Flory, crossly. 'I've told you before. And I don't have belly-ache.'

'What, never? Or hardly ever?'

She wished Chalmers would not use a tooth-pick to pass the time. She wished he might have something more to do, so that he need not talk to her. Ennui never worried her, except at second-hand, through Chalmers.

'I bet it's raining, now, in Manchester,' said Chalmers, with a sigh.

'One thing I like about this place, you don't need to speculate whether it's going to rain tomorrow.'

'Wonder if Her Highness has made it yet!' said Chalmers.

Miss Flory did not answer, but a peculiar expression came to rest on her face.

'Go on, say it,' said Chalmers. 'You hope she doesn't.'

'I hope it isn't a boy!' said Miss Flory, with asperity.

'A new king,' said Chalmers, still using the tooth-pick. 'And the kid there, prince of the blood royal or not, automatically becomes part of the background.'

'All!' said Miss Flory. 'As if it wasn't — No. It isn't. It isn't enough,' she said, passionately. 'He must become King. He must! It wouldn't be fair if he didn't. The only son of a Prince and Princess killed together in a road accident. His father would have become King. Now it is his right.'

'And a nobody, a woman some call an adventuress, or did until she became the friend of an 80-year-old King by whom she was titled Princesse, so that he might marry

her with a little less disgrace, what would you do with her child, old girl — that is, if it is a son?"

'Princesse! Princesse!' cried Miss Flory, on a high note. 'If I—'

A laugh from the group of bathers on the promontory silenced her. She saw that a beautifully blonde woman with a golden skin had turned her head as she lay and was regarding her with some interest, some scorn. One of the men made a remark, the others laughed.

'They are saying, that crowd in the hotel, that perhaps it won't be the child of a senile old man. Who would not be ready to serve his King, they say?'

'I don't like jokes in bad taste,' said Miss Flory.

'I wish they didn't, up at the castle,' said Chalmers, equably. 'My job would be safer.'

'Victor!' called Miss Flory, suddenly returning to her main preoccupation. 'You must not go out there.'

She was too late. The boy seized his chance and was swimming out to the wreck. There was no danger, the sea was shallow, the waves as indolent as the sun-bathers. He reached the wreck, and clambered aboard.

'Victor, come back!'

He waved his hand, and laughed out loud. The sense of being out of reach of Miss Flory, for even a little while, was glorious. The sea washing over the deck made it slippery, an adventure. He made his way to the mast, now fixed at an angle, pointing perhaps to some lost star, lost like the ship, lost in the sea of time. And now there was waiting, as always, the crab.

In a mortise of the hull was a crab. Whether it stayed there, till the tide was higher, and then walked out, or whether it was trapped there, and would never get out, he had no means of knowing. Only as the slow warm waves

washed over the hulk, and over the crab, it moved, it too with a wave-like motion of its claws. A tenant? A prisoner? He would never know. Always it was there.

The little boy's brown face, with its refined, eager features, watched the crab with intensity, and out of intense, beady eyes, the crab watched the boy. I am a prisoner, it seemed to be saying. Do not harm me! And the boy, with a sense of wonder and pity, felt himself to be free, nothing could harm him. Not till the sun fell from the sky, which it would never do. Not till the pink rocks farther out, in the deep water, had become yet more corroded by time and the wash of waves idle only in seeming.

'Hullo!'

Holding on to a worn, wet rope dependent still from the mast, a dark-brown naked boy who had clambered out of the water unseen, now spoke. For answer, Victor nodded his head, and smiled faintly. It was not safe to do more, he knew. If he did, at once Miss Flory would call, and Chalmers approach the boy who had dared approach him, and send him on his way. Then, emboldened by the thought that neither Miss Flory nor Chalmers could reach him there, Victor spoke.

'Hallo,' he said. 'Look! This crab.'

Intently together they peered at it.

'Do you think it can get out, if it wants?' Victor asked, breathlessly.

The dark boy shook his head. 'I do not know.' He poked a sudden finger, attempting to dislodge it.

'Don't do that! You might hurt it.'

'Why! It is only a crab.'

'But I like crabs. I like them alive. I do not like them dead.'

'You don't have to play with crabs. You have real toys, much better toys,' said the other, wistfully, as it were from a distance.

'Oh, no,' said Victor, hurriedly. 'I have only the crab. I—I am a poor boy, like yourself.'

The expression of wonder on the other boy's face deepened.

'You are the grandson of a King. I have heard them say it, those over there.' He indicated the sun-bathers. 'One day you yourself will be King. Unless — unless something happens to stop you.'

'Nothing will happen,' said Victor, with a natural arrogance on the subject. 'Of course I shall be King. But you need not think of that.' He made a royal gesture of excuse. 'Here, on this wreck, we can play together, if you like.'

'No, no. They are calling you, now. The fat man is telling me I must go.' He prepared to slip over the side.

'Wait for me,' said Victor, in haste. 'We will swim it together.'

And together they made the few yards to the shore. As soon as his feet touched sand the dark boy scampered away, making a wide detour to avoid Chalmers, who had come down to the brink. Under the sea wall he reached clothes, and put them on.

'Victor, come at once,' said Miss Flory.

As he trod up the beach, the sand beneath his feet hot and shining like particles of glass, his eyes followed the other boy wistfully. The dark boy's aspect changed completely with the adoption of his few ragged garments. He was no longer lithe and clean, a fit playmate for royalty. He was now no more than a figure of the little town's alleys.

'It is the boy who sold you meringues yesterday!' said Victor, suddenly.

'Don't I know it,' Chalmers grunted. 'My stomach won't be right for a week.'

'I warned you,' said Miss Flory. 'You couldn't resist them.'

'They were all right, this foreign stuff always is. It's what happens after that's wrong. What can you expect, in a country where it's safer to drink wine than water or milk.'

'In a few minutes, we are going indoors,' Miss Flory told Victor. 'Till then, sit quietly by me.'

The boy sat in the sand, letting it run heavy and warm through his fingers. Out to sea, beyond the paradisaal ship, a patch of rich, deep blue in the milky blue denoted a sudden depth of water. The sky was milky blue, like the sea, dusted all over with the gold of the sun's rays. Without haste but with a steady motion from the shelter of the rocks emerged a primitive boat that yet managed to seem opulent, having a scarlet sail.

'I wish I had some red paper. I could make a boat like that,' said Victor, dreamily.

'It's like a butterfly, isn't it, dear?' said Miss Flory.

'No,' said Victor.

'Next year, I am going to learn to swim,' she said, as if coming to a great decision. 'Then I can go with you, to make sure you are safe.'

'You said that last year,' said Victor, equably.

'Perhaps I said it the year before,' thought Miss Flory. Perhaps I shall say it again next year. She sighed. I suppose, she admitted, with a quiver, I am getting too old.

Again one of the bathers laughed, lazily. Lizards! thought Miss Flory, with a fierce jealousy of their style ability, money, even the good looks of the women,

particularly the supercilious blonde. At least, she was doing a job! What would any of them have made of life, born poor, father a drunken road-sweeper, mother resigning too early the cares of a household to one too young. And yet, what of it! The gold sun was their god. An indolence chained them, their blood thickened, around their limbs crept the flame-like tendrils of an immortal vine. Doing a job! As if it mattered, when the summer sun shone on that shore, the sea lispng lazily!

‘Look, Miss Flory! What I have found in the sand.’

‘A nail. A rusty old nail out of some old boat. Throw it away.’

‘No. I want to keep it. It’s the biggest I’ve ever seen. And look, it isn’t bright and sharp, it’s all colours, like a shell.’

‘That’s because it’s been in the sea. The salt has affected it.’

‘I think it’s lovely. Not smooth, but all different little bits on it. Like — like the Queen’s diamonds.’

Thus unexpectedly brought back to her former pre-occupation, Miss Flory rose.

‘Come, Victor. Time to go.’

On the doorstep of the villa they were met by Madame Bonnet.

‘Ah, Madame Flory, what news! What sad news!’

Miss Flory turned pale, and stopped in her tracks.

‘The little poor one!’ said Madame Bonnet. She stopped and kissed him.

‘Madame Bonnet, you know you are not allowed to kiss the Prince. No one is. Will you tell me what has happened!’

‘A son,’ said Madame Bonnet, rolling the word heavily round her tongue. ‘It has just been announced by the

radio. And he, the old man, 80 years old yesterday. What a wonder!’

Miss Flory burst into tears.

‘There, there, it matters nothing,’ said Madame Bonnet. ‘And forget not, he is still a Prince.’

‘It is not the same! It is not the same!’ said Miss Flory, brokenly.

Victor stood looking at them, with puckered brows and eyes of misgiving.

‘What is the matter, Miss Flory?’ he asked.

‘Nothing, my dear. Nothing at all. Nothing that matters, You shall be told, later on.’

‘Is my grandfather dead?’ he asked, in a suitably hushed voice.

‘No, no.’

‘Perhaps it would have been better!’ said Madame Bonnet, cheerfully.

‘We must not think such things, much less say them,’ said Miss Flory, attempting to regain her composure.

During the evening meal she was too preoccupied to notice that Victor kept the nail half-hidden by his plate. He had developed a liking for its many-hued, many-faceted surface, its rusty reds and purples. It was not so much a nail as a part of a boat, of the wreck that was abandoned now to the crab, to seaweed and the declining sun.

In the bath, at bedtime, he lay on his stomach whilst the sand and salt were washed from him. Except for white skin where his trunks had been, he was a beautiful golden brown. The sun had bleached his chestnut hair and brought out gold threads in it. He was a sun-child, laughing with delicious laughter at his everlasting play.

In the mind of Miss Flory, against this child was

arrayed not first and foremost the terrifying panoply of state laws and procedure, but the woman who, she felt, had got into bed simply and solely in order to dispossess him of his heritage, his right. He was no longer the heir-apparent. The regal trappings with which she had so long invested him were laid aside. Wickedness and folly, so the hallucinatory female felt, were responsible for his fall in status. But the child grieved not. His day was for itself enough. And seeing him thus, at this moment, Miss Flory experienced a peculiar feeling.

Two things had happened. In a castle, far to the north, a woman married to a reigning monarch had achieved her dearest wish: mother to a future king. In a tiny villa of a small Mediterranean resort a king had turned into a child, normal, ordinary. No great burdens were to be his. The course of history had been altered, the effects negligible, incalculable — at that stage, who could tell? — but it was no longer his affair, his destiny, his pigeon. Born, like herself, a slave (or so she conceived it, in that momentary illumination), he had become, so far as it was possible, free.

Damp as he was from the bath, sweet-smelling and native to a pristine world as only clean small children can be, Miss Flory put her arms round him and held him tightly to her for a minute, as she had never ventured to before.

‘My King!’ she said, in a whisper. ‘My little King!’

‘Let me go!’ he said, and broke from her to scamper laughing into bed.

‘My faith, that silly virgin upstairs,’ Madame Bonnet was saying to her husband. ‘Anyone would think it was her own child!’

Victor snuggled down between the sheets, an impish

look on his face. His eyes were large and shining, his body momentarily over-active as always at the end of a long, happy day.

'Prayers, now,' said Miss Flory.

He repeated them after her, till he came to: 'Make me fit to be a King.'

'No,' Miss Flory corrected him. "'Make me loyal to the King".'

He repeated the words drowsily, without question. He had another preoccupation: under his pillow was the nail. Miss Flory must not see it, if she did he would most certainly lose it. So he kept very quiet, and was glad when she darkened the room.

'Good-night.'

'Good-night, Miss Flory.'

The bedroom door closed, and his hand went under the pillow, secured the precious nail. Solid it was in a world now evanescent, on the brink of sleep. In his half-waking dreams he stood on the ship again, one hand on the tattered rope dependent from the mast. The crab in its mortise prison waved its claws, imploring, threatening. The sun was a mast-high beacon. In the water was the dark brown boy, buoyed up, swimming away. From the wreck it was possible to see one of the almost transparent jelly-fish which abounded at that season, floating on the wave which, illuminated by the sun, was pale-green, like water in a tank. Carried away by a wave, the jelly-fish floated nearer to the swimming boy. Victor shouted, pointed. As he did so, he felt the nail slipping from his grasp. He made to regain it, but the slow, warm tide had him now, and in a moment more he was asleep.

A. G. MORRIS

Black Rod

THERE are many stories still current about my uncle, Lieutenant-General Sir Bernard Egerton Philiberd, G.C.V.O., K.C.M.G., D.S.O., etc., etc.! This one has never been told.

You may recollect that he rounded off a distinguished military career by becoming Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod, at The House of Lords, and, by gad, sir, he made it a rod of iron! People had to jump to it, from Dukes downwards. Nothing slipshod was tolerated.

'Hang it, you ought to know better. Had every chance to learn.' How often he rubbed that into me.

'Now, look here, Leonard, your father was a good citizen and your mother was a treasure, but you're a wastrel. I'll pay this debt, but no more. You ought to know better . . .'

My parents were dead. I lived with Uncle Bernard, and he saw me through Eton and Oxford.

He despised me, not without reason, and I was frightened of him, on the same terms.

'You can't hang round for ever. What d'you propose to do? At your age I was risking my neck in the Boer war . . .'

He had me on the hop all the time.

And it was worse, when he lost his sight. I was sorry for him, of course, and it was terrible, but it made him more of a martinet than ever.

For two years he fought against his blindness and held on to his job, which he loved. The whole thing appealed to him, the pageantry, the order, the discipline.

And splendid he looked in full rig, with withered face

and bushy eyebrows, tall and easy, wielding authority to the manner born. There he goes, Black Rod! Made for the part!

Look at his sword, and the jabot of fine lace!

But he had to give in. Everybody was sorry, even those who trembled, for he was, well, just himself, soldier and individual. Before long he was stone blind.

In some ways it was not so bad for him, as for more haphazard mortals. Everything in the house had always had a place. Every chair, every table, every book, every ornament. Now he insisted more fiercely than ever:

'I will have order. I must have order, d'you understand? I must put my hand on what I want, when I want . . .'

'Yes, Uncle.'

All his life he had been used to military detail, inspecting men's kits for the minutest deviation from pattern. So, in the bathroom, his razor, his toothbrush, his sponge, his towel, each had an exact space allocated. It was the same with his clothes.

He had a manservant, an old soldier, who had to see that every article was *THERE*, and nowhere else, or there was the devil to pay.

Down in the hall it was equally precise. On *THAT* peg his bowler hat, on *THAT* hanger his overcoat, *THERE* his rolled umbrella, *THERE* his white stick.

It was hard to change from Black Rod to White Stick. At first he had rebelled.

'Lived here for years. They all know me, all the police, all the bus drivers and cabmen. White stick, indeed!'

'But, Uncle,' I dared, 'The police may change. And all the private cars can't know you.'

'Not know *ME*? Hang it!'

Luckily his friends backed me up.

'Don't want to see you run over just yet, Philiberd.'

He yielded, grumbling.

And soon the White Stick became part of his daily ritual. It had its special place, on the extreme right of the umbrella stand, clear of all other canes.

Sir Bernard had always been a personality, always in the news, and now his White Stick took on with the Press.

Uncle was constantly being spotted on dangerous crossings and photographed.

GENERAL SHOWS THE WHITE STICK. NEVER THE WHITE FEATHER!

He pretended to be angry, when told, but I think he enjoyed the publicity. He hated being a back number. So he flourished his new rod with a heroic panache. He took constant risks, expecting instant obedience, stepping off into the street, with a wave of his arm, and a roar of rage, if he were kept waiting.

'Haven't you got eyes? There's my STICK.'

What he really relished was being recognized and egged-on to further dare-devilry.

'Go it, Sir Bernard, give 'em hell . . .'

So it continued, and now I reach the disgraceful part of the story. I can only tell it, after all these years, with shame, with more than shame, horror at my own behaviour.

I can feebly plead extenuating circumstances. Things were pretty low for me. I was harder up than ever, I dared not ask for money. And there was a girl.

I realized that there wasn't the faintest chance of getting married on what I had, and I could imagine the snort of Uncle Bernard, if I stated the case.

'Married, eh! And what are you going to live on? I'll not lift a finger to keep you without working. You ought to know better . . .'

The old formula. But I knew it all right, and I boiled with unrighteous indignation.

There was Uncle Bernard, with a pension, with a private income, with a house and servants, and I was his heir, but penniless! My thoughts were dark, but I could not breathe a word of protest. He might change his will. That had been threatened more than once.

'If you don't look for a job of work I'll find some decent serving soldier, and leave him all I've got.'

I had to keep quiet.

Now, every afternoon my Uncle went for a walk alone. He was very independent, refusing all help from me or his valet. He put on his own coat, he took out his own stick. He walked, like the cat, by himself, usually in the same direction, near the beloved Houses of Parliament, or the War Office. Bearing this in mind I gave way to a frightful impulse. There might be a way, there was a way. Like the snake, in *The Speckled Band*, it might not strike at once, not for days, but in the end . . .

I had, in my own room, a stick, identical in shape and size with Uncle's white cane. A black stick.

It was a horrible notion forming, and it made me sick. I put it aside for weeks, but that girl! I wanted her like hell. She was not a poor man's wife, not she.

I loved my Uncle, in a way; at least I respected him. He was all that I was not. He was a great man. Even his D.S.O., they say, was worth more than most V.C.'s. He never hesitated. He made up his mind and went for his objective bald-headed, with direct simplicity and courage.

One afternoon I did the thing. I knew when he would go out, so I skulked downstairs first to the hall. And I changed the sticks.

'Black Rod again,' I thought.

I hid the white stick between two umbrellas. If anything went wrong, I argued, nobody could touch me. A blind man, an accident, the wrong stick. I went back to my room and waited for him to go out.

As soon as I heard the door slam I went down again, just to make sure.

The black stick had gone. The white one was still concealed behind the umbrellas. I left it where it was. If my Uncle came back safely this time I would change the sticks over, so that the servants noticed nothing. This performance would have to be repeated, until . . . I was sweating. I suppose he had been gone five minutes, and I was still standing in the hall.

My heart began to beat fiercely. I realized what I was doing. It was murder. I was already a murderer, by intention. I remembered all the General had done for me, in spite of his rough tongue.

I remembered all he had done for England. His will had helped to turn the tide, when we stood alone.

I ran out of the house in full pursuit. I knew there was a crossing that he favoured, out of bravado, a horrible crowded place, where there was no policeman on point duty and little traffic control. Every man for himself, every driver out for his rights.

Buses shot along and cars and vans. There were no Zebras at that time.

I ran along, cursing, thrusting, pushing people aside, looking out for his straight figure, shouting incoherently.

'Let me pass. Hell. The wrong stick . . .'

'Confound you, sir, who d'you think you are . . .'

'For God's sake . . . the wrong stick . . .'

There he was, erect as a boy, beautifully turned out, bowler hat, full-skirted overcoat, gloves and — a black

stick — I could not catch up with him, but I rushed on, still shouting.

He reached the crossing. He held up his stick, as if he were leading a cavalry charge, and he stepped out firmly into the traffic.

There was a terrible grinding of brakes. I heard shouts and screams from women.

Sir Bernard never faltered. He brandished his cane more furiously, and he went ahead.

I could hear drivers swearing and railing at him. He rounded on them and let fly, in parade ground voice:

‘Can’t you see a something something WHITE STICK?’

‘Gawd! It’s old Sir Bernard . . .’

I was in the road by then, yelling frantically.

‘It’s General Philiberd. He had the wrong stick. A mistake . . .’

That maddened him.

‘Wrong stick? I never take the wrong stick. Never in my life.’

The Press were at him in full force, full of questions, coining captions:

BLACK ROD CHARGES BUSES. FLUTTER ON THE STICK EXCHANGE.

A policeman appeared, breathless, an old friend of the General’s.

‘Bit shaken, Sir Bernard? Fetch you a cab, sir?’

‘Damn it, no, I’m as fit as a fiddle. I’ll walk home with my fool of a nephew.’

But he gave the Constable five shillings, with a hand as steady as a rock.

On the way back my Uncle said nothing, just grunted once or twice. My relief was intense.

That night, though, after a glass of port, when we were alone, he said, without warning:

‘Want to get rid of me, eh?’

‘Uncle!’ I nearly dropped my glass.

‘Don’t Uncle me, you rip. I knew I had the wrong stick. Wood wasn’t right. Not smooth enough. Couldn’t find the other.’

‘Why didn’t you call for me?’ I asked, trembling and sick.

‘That’s rich,’ he said. ‘That’s ruby rich! Call in you! No, my lad, I can put two and two together. ’Nuff said.’

‘But why did you go out, if you knew?’ I cried, waiting for his assault.

The General squared his shoulders.

‘In my Regiment we had a rule,’ he said, ‘NEVER RETIRE. So I went ahead as usual.’

‘But you shouted about your white stick!’

‘Bluff,’ said Sir Bernard, ‘Never admit you’re wrong. The best defence is to attack. Now, tell me all about it, and take another glass of wine. It’s 1912.’

I told him my miserable story, with shame and tears. When I’d done he put his hand on my shoulder, and he said:

‘My boy, that was bad, but we’ve all done something rotten in our time. I can’t throw stones. Let’s make a fresh start and try to understand each other better.’

Black Rod lived on, I’m glad to say, another five years, but I did not marry the lady. Sir Bernard met her, and then he said to me:

‘Leonard, there are times when a gentleman ought to withdraw.’ He was right, God rest his soul.

VERNON PARSONS

In Transit

THE slinky air hostess delivered the bad news to the passengers that the aircraft, in transit from Singapore to London, would be delayed at Bangkok for twenty-four hours. A bus was waiting to take them from the airport to the city. Her beautifully marcelled voice almost succeeded in converting an annoying delay into a surprise picnic thoughtfully laid on by the Company.

The occupants of seats seven and eight, next to one another on the starboard side, were, according to the passenger list, a Mr Holmes and a Mr Michelet. They were strangers, it seemed, who on joining the aircraft at Singapore had found themselves side by side. They had not spoken during the six hours flight, having inherited the mortal feud of chance captives in an aeroplane, that Black Maria of the Heavens from which there is no escape except by landing or death.

Mr Holmes, fiftyish, travelling on a British passport, belonged to the tall, heavy, and jowlish type which, slumped down in a seat, looks like a dyspeptic satyr, but which, aroused, tends to be bland and jovial, and may easily break into belly-rumbling laughter. Mr Michelet, ten years younger, travelling on a American passport but possessing a slight French accent, belonged to an opposite but also well-marked type — below medium height and slim, dressed in a natty palmbeach suit which, one could swear, would never look crumpled even if its owner were doubled up in agony, and whose etched face was a handsome Voltairian mask flexible only within the range of

half a centimetre. One felt that he savoured life like an epicure but sometimes found it rather acid. Each might have belonged to a wide range of professions, but with air-minded charity Holmes put his companion down as a second-rate Hollywood actor on holiday, while Michelet accounted for Holmes as anything between a naval officer and a pimp.

Each one, insulating himself like a porcupine with invisible quills, settled down to read. Michelet toyed with a book by Evelyn Waugh and a play by Jean Anouilh as Holmes turned over the pages of one of the aircraft's magazines. 'Escapist tripe!' murmured Holmes to himself as he glanced over his shoulder. Michelet may conceivably have heard him, for abandoning his books he fished in his despatch case and brought out a complete week's set of recent numbers of the London *Daily Worker* which he closely perused. As he did so he emitted a series of what sounded like low chuckles alternating with covert sneers, the latter directed, it seemed, less at the newspaper than at the passenger next door. 'Good Lord, what next!' snorted Holmes *sotto voce* and his good-humoured face looked almost bilious. Then he himself delved into his own despatch case and pulled out one by one copies of the *Chicago Tribune*, the *San Francisco Examiner*, the *Osservatore Romano*, and the *Madrid Arriba* which he arranged in a fanshape before devouring them one by one with muted ejaculations which might have stood for anything from a whoop to a guffaw. Michelet, though retaining his quizzical smile, was visibly shaken, for his eyebrows went up a whole millimetre and his gaze flicked towards the adjoining seat and back again. But immediately he returned to to his columns of sedition, making new funny noises from time to time as he wallowed in the latest excesses (ex

Moscow) of the capitalistic cannibals and the fascist beasts.

Up to this point the two had only seen one another obliquely, but as Holmes returned to his seat from an excursion down the aisle their eyes met for the first time. Each had an immediate feeling that he had seen the other before. The mystery was enough to convert a merely peevish resentment into a lively suspicion. Where could it have been? Washington, Buenos Aires, Moscow, Algiers? Neither could give it a time or place.

On the bus the men put as much space between them as possible, which meant that Holmes mounted into that queer galleon's poop peculiar to airport buses, while Michelet sat behind the driver. With the career of the vehicle over the yawning crevasses which in Thailand do duty for ruts, they temporarily forgot the irritations of the flight in the effort of cushioning their spines, for the verve and virtuosity which in Spain belong by right to the torcadors, are in Thailand the special preserve of motor-drivers, so that passengers get all the sensation of a Coney Island railway at no extra cost. Thus Holmes and Michelet and their companions had upright, oblique, and upside-down glimpses of enormous marble palaces, of memorials to unheard-of wars, and hundreds of palm-leaf shacks which contrasted so strikingly with the chromium-plated vistas of the quasi-inter-planetary airport. Then they skidded to a standstill before the portals of the Hotel Mogador (£5 an hour, exclusive of food and shelter).

With a whole day before they would again be shepherded back up the gangway to their narrow prison, like galley-slaves sharing an idle oar, the two fellow passengers would have continued to avoid one another like the plague if it had not been that a puckish fate decided to bring them prematurely together again.

Holmes had calculated to a nicety the rhythm of his enforced stay in the great sprawling city on the Menam. He would make a round of the public offices and embassies, spend an hour over his papers, and then with graduated doses of gin and vermouth anaesthetize himself for dinner and for bed. Michelet, for his part, had his own requirements and plans. Like Holmes, he would be able to fill in time with profit in paying courtesy calls and then, failing a horse to ride, the next best thing was to go to the races to experience vicariously the violent action that his constitution craved. So off he went.

Meanwhile it happened that Holmes ran into an old acquaintance at the Mogador, a very urbane and sociable young Thai from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs whose name was Asavabahuchulalongkorn (pronounced Leng) who insisted on taking Holmes under his wing and showing him the sights. So for the tenth time in his life the liverish satyr (as temperament now made him) received a composite impression of vivid green gardens and splendid trees, of a forest of watts sewing up the heavens with their needly spires, and of sacred 'white' elephants off duty shambling round in dirty grey pyjamas. Crocodiles (also sacred) poked out their snouts from water-lily ponds, dreaming wistfully of stray dogs or even more succulent fare. Then, inevitably, Leng directed the driver of the shiny Packard to make for the principal Bangkok races.

A concourse of fashionable Thais was gathered on the verandah underneath the grandstand. They laughed and chatted and greeted all and sundry, Europeans included, with that ease and lack of self-consciousness they owe to never having been a 'subject race'. The Thai ladies, in languorous pulchritude, swayed past like animated *divas* from an Angkor relief, their Parisian make-up giving a

naughty slant to their high cheekbones and lotus-bud mouths.

Owing to the shortage of full-sized horses, the races were alternately of Australian 'whalers' and of 'midgets' — ponies ridden by twelve-year-old boys — and the babble of voices and the buzz of excitement as the horses came into the straight might have been recorded at Goodwood or Longchamps except for the high lilt of the Thai language which merged with the odours of a tropical afternoon.

Leng moved from table to table, dispensing cheerful small-talk, and between races took his friends to the paddock to size up 'form'. The race-goers of this special enclosure, the Jockey Club Verandah, gathered together in knots, and those familiar with Bangkok society had no difficulty in picking out the knot of Thais from the Ministry of Home Affairs, of diplomats from the embassies and the ministries, or of officials from the United Nations, with a sprinkling of members of the various cultural, scientific, or financial missions. For Bangkok was the Istamboul of the Far East, the centre of international intrigue, the place where the opposite sides in the Cold War met and intermingled like troops in no-man's land at the 1914 Christmas armistice. There was one special group of American, British, French, and Dutch, while, keeping strictly to itself and full of starch and protocol even on holiday, was a small party from the Soviet Embassy with one or two Thais sitting on its fringe.

In his visits to the tables Leng had picked up an old acquaintance whom he brought along to the table where Holmes was sitting. Who should it be but Michelet!

'What, that fellow again!' was the simultaneous reaction of each to this unwelcome encounter, expressed silently in their individual idioms.

But introduced by Leng, the two out of common politeness smiled at one another a synthetic smile of greeting. And in this smile was a question and a challenge. Leng called for more whisky and more soda and then, little by little, at the sight of the little amber bubbles bursting with sheer glee in the bright light, a warm trickle of good will began to creep up behind their eyes and dissolve the animosity generated in the aeroplane — that high-powered 'magic carpet' stamped out of tin. When they had twice backed the same winner, and Holmes had lit up at the sight of the wiry little Michelet in excited dumb-show displacing the jockey and himself riding his fancy to victory, and Michelet had seen his erstwhile enemy roaring with gargantuan laughter as a 'midget' charged right into the grandstand, dispersing the shrieking ladies and sending glasses crashing to the floor, each decided that the other was not quite the muddled oaf he had thought him. An exchange of cards revealed that Holmes was on a UNESCO mission while Michelet represented a well-known American exporting firm.

Yet the suspicion and the mystery remained unaltered at the back of their minds as each silently and fruitlessly searched his memory for a clue.

'What does Mr Pollitt say of all this mess in Asia?' asked Holmes of the other with a mischievous grin.

Michelet was fully equal to the sally and grasping his lapels and pouting his lips like a minuscule Maurice Chevalier he answered with a shrug:

'Obviously that the imperialist war-mongers in their attempt to crush freedom-loving peoples had created a chain of parasitic puppet states of which Thailand is a glaring example. Their evil plan was to bolster up the aggressive war in Korea and to this end were pouring in

millions of dollars to bribe the gangster leaders — but need I go on? Perhaps in return you will tell me what General Franco or the executors of the late William Randolph Hearst place on current events?"

"That is equally easy," replied Holmes, a born mime, moving his spectacles down his nose and assuming a look like Mr Foster Dulles at a press conference. "The Russian imperialists in their bid for world power are attempting to undermine the free governments of South-east Asia and to insinuate their poisonous doctrines into the minds of the newly-independent peoples. Fortunately the courageous decision of the United Nations to call a halt to Communist aggression in Korea and the creation of SEATO — but I think you know the rest?" Then he added, dropping the banter, "But what do you yourself think of things?"

The two men looked challengingly at one another — the one with a wide grin, the other with a half smile and a cynical twinkle in his eyes.

"Haven't we met somewhere before?" asked Holmes, putting the question that was uppermost in both their minds.

"That is the very feeling *I* had," answered Michelet, "not *met*, perhaps, but at least *seen* one another."

But try as they could neither could say quite when or where. Maybe it was an illusion after all?

There is no knowing to what degree of confidence the two might have arrived in their searchings for their previous contact or for a way out of the world's distraction if it had not been for a silent but dramatic incident which occurred at that very moment.

A woman, seemingly in her early forties, came on to the verandah by the door leading into the vestibule. She was

unmistakably Slav of the Boyar caste, dolichocephalous and leptorrhine, with the feline grace and the hot-house beauty of the old Imperial Corps de Ballet, and her most remarkable features were her eyes which were twin limpid pools of grey-green mystery. But while truth and chivalry pay this ungrudging tribute, impartiality at the same time asserts that she was also slightly embalmed and stringy, for whereas ordinary women are allowed a few comfortable roundings and aesthetic protuberances as they enter middle age, no such concession is made to Boyar beauties. Thus nature had sharpened her up a bit at the corners as it added a few drops of water to the lustrous pigment of her eyes. All the same, she was of the kind of women that in their heyday, and afterwards, can break up happy homes like matchsticks and persuade sluggish bachelors to outshine Casanova.

Someone from the Soviet table beckoned to her and she went and joined their group.

The effect of her arrival on both Holmes and Michelet was electric, though each made a great effort to conceal the fact. But in an almost imperceptible dilation of the pupils and the raising of the brows of Michelet and a wide stare and reddening of Holmes's face betrayed each to the other that they had been surprised in the possession of a common secret. Both of them recognized the new arrival as Lydia Chernishev, known to them both as an agent of the USSR.

Men's faces, like their words, are carefully conditioned to conceal their thoughts, and after the first shock of recognition Holmes and Michelet recovered their composure and talked on as if nothing had happened. With compliant adroitness Michelet allowed himself to be talked round to what appeared to be Holmes's point of view, but

with equally compliant adroitness Holmes was doing precisely the same sort of thing. Thus it was that insensibly the American found himself uttering sentiments that would not be thought amiss in Chicago or the Vatican, while the Briton was a little surprised to hear his own voice endorsing the viewpoint of *Pravda* or of Tass. These tactics quite befuddled them both (the more so as the mind of each was far away from what he was talking about and was concentrating on the lady he could see out of the corner of his eye), but at the mid-point there was apparent coincidence in their views. Meanwhile the pulse of each was beating faster than it had for many a long day.

Now came the turn of the Boyar face and the grey-green eyes to undergo the ordeal of surprise. Walking across the verandah with a perfectly cubical Soviet military attaché with a Neronian frown to get a closer view of the races, Lydia Chernishev (if she it was), a shimmering ballerina in white nylon, came face to face with Michelet. He stared sightlessly in front of him, but she, the moment she saw him cried out:

‘Jules!’

The American’s features oscillated a fraction of a second within their micrometric tolerance, but smiling he responded.

‘Lydia!’

And at the very same instant her eyes also caught those of Holmes who was gazing at her like a stag paralyzed by a panther.

‘Richard!’ she cried.

She allowed not a moment in which they could have time to feel awkward (if awkward they must feel) but added with sophisticated surprise:

‘Fancy meeting *you* two here!’

She took the chair which Michelet offered her, but her companion, the Soviet military attaché, refused to sit down and stood aloof, impatient and even more frowning and looking as if he were made of bricks from the Kremlin.

Lydia immediately got to work on both of them, bathing them both in the aura of her fascinations. And both of them felt themselves succumbing again after all these years. Where were they bound and how long were they staying? They really must meet again, and Holmes and Michelet mumbled delighted agreement (neither revealed that this was a meeting he would have avoided at all costs).

'But I had no idea you knew one another,' she said, and then added with a silvery burst of laughter, 'In fact I was most careful that you should never meet when you visited me in my apartment in Tokyo, though once or twice your coming or going was so close that you might easily have passed one another on the stairs.' (That is precisely where we must have met before, was the thought that occurred to both the men.)

But the Soviet military attaché was getting impatient, and he was obviously not used to waiting. His frown deepened into a trench-system and seizing Lydia by the arm he gave it such a sure grip that she winced, and he hauled her away.

'An old friend to both of us,' remarked Holmes to prevent the silence becoming noticeable.

'Yes,' Michelet volunteered, 'I knew her in Tokyo in 1945 and '46. I was with OSS at the time.'

'Oh, were you,' Holmes responded (he knew well this American 'cloak and dagger' organization). 'I was — er — attached to the Control Commission, and for a time I was with SCAP.'

Both of them had, it seemed, frequented the same clubs and the same messes at the same period but had never met. The impression of having seen one another before might arise from some contact in these places, or it might be, as they thought, due to their passing one another, like Box and Cox, on the stairs of Lydia's sumptuous apartment off the Ginza where she was ostensibly engaged on Red Cross relief work for displaced persons. But from being two human beings seeking together for some glimmer of illumination in the dismal night of world politics, they had become automata confronting one another with the expressions of waxworks. Who but a fellow agent in the innermost circles of espionage (each argued to himself) would be likely to have had an inkling of what Lydia Chernishev was really doing in Tokyo, or of the master she served? At the same time each had to admit of an alternative explanation. But although they continued to talk all the sparkle and the reality had gone out of their conversation. When the last race was over Michelet disappeared in a taxi while Leng, urbane and garrulous as ever, drove Holmes in his shiny Packard back to the Hotel Mogador.

The illuminated panel inscribed, 'fasten safety belts — no smoking' had gone out and the aircraft was again cruising at 12,000 feet. A huge billowing mass of cumulus cloud, like a Bikini mushroom, towered up on the starboard side. Holmes and Michelet were relaxing — so far as 'relax' is the right word for men alternately dozing or pretending to read or looking at their wristwatches until their funny-bones ached. No more were *Daily Workers* or *Chicago Tribunes* flaunted but each sought the political neutrality of the *New Yorker* or *Country Life*. They were now officially

friends, but each regarded the other not as a person but as the *persona* of a (suspected) spy.

A while later, looking round, Holmes saw with a shock far less well concealed than that of the day before, a lady in Red Cross uniform sitting in a seat by the gangway, quietly manicuring her long scarlet finger-nails, and apparently unaware of the presence of either of them. It was Lydia Chernishev! She must have boarded the plane at the last moment for he had not caught sight of her at the airport. From the air hostess Holmes obtained a passenger list, but while he could find no Lydia Chernishev he did find a Mrs Bonington A. Carter, which, by elimination, must be she. Shortly afterwards Michelet also looked round and his cigarette quivered momentarily on his acidulous lips as he made the same discovery. Then both men pretended to go to sleep. But before they had got half way to Rangoon each had in turn yielded to the demand of nature. As he had passed towards the back of the plane the Red Cross lady's eyes were closed but he had felt a slight pressure on the palm of his hand as he had passed her seat, and in the privacy of the 'Gentlemen' he had decoded the message passed to him.

When Holmes and Michelet resumed their seats they knew with a final knowledge several things they had not dreamt of before. Each had known himself a secret agent making for a rendezvous which would be revealed to him at some appropriate time, but now each knew that, far from being Communist spies, they were fellow agents of the self-same mighty Western Power. But what of Lydia — when had she switched her allegiance? For that matter when had Holmes or Michelet switched theirs — if they had ever switched it? Quite likely the other had been a loyal US or British citizen the whole time — he must have

been. Why, then, had each been so ignobly suspicious? Was it even possible that, when they had known her in Tokyo, before the Cold War, she was not working for Russia as they had both believed, but for the USA all the time? Or was she working for both of them simultaneously? Did the Soviet Embassy at Bangkok have any suspicion that they were fraternizing with a Russian renegade and a deadly enemy — or didn't they care? (Wouldn't the cubical attaché have gripped Lydia's arm even harder and his Neronian frown have become even deeper if he had guessed?) But what Holmes and Michelet knew now without a shadow of doubt was that Mrs Bonington A. Carter was the co-ordinator of a mission which, under sealed orders, was bound for the Burma-China frontier in the Shan States, a 'trouble-spot' in the not-so-cold war.

'Have a cigarette?' invited Michelet with stereotyped politeness.

'Thank you,' said Holmes, taking one, with the same synthetic grin he had used when they had met at the races.

The air hostess, as she served them lunch, bent over them distilling the same cosmetic charm with which she had announced the delay of the plane. (They both of them had their tickets, so far as she and the Company were concerned it did not matter whether they were Communists, Moral Rearmers, Buddhists, or Bimetallists.) Then, by a common inspiration, they both looked around at the same time to where the lady in the Red Cross uniform lay back in her seat with closed eyes like a Slavonic Juliet in the tomb scene. Then, unmistakably, she opened one grey-green limpid eye and after a second closed it again in what might have been a wink. Holmes turned towards Michelet and grinned while Michelet responded with his acidulous smile.

MICHAEL REDGROVE

Master-Carpenter

ONE by one the rungs of the topmost ladder sank to eye-level and his hands reached up for the next and next, laboriously: *These youngsters they can — fuff — monkey up bloomin' ladders, streak o' lightnin'. But me — fuff — oh lor — no good sayin' ladders don't give me no trouble, b'cause they ruddy do.*

From ground level up there had been nothing to see except ladders and scaffold rods and the blank new wall. But now the last ladder became a silhouette against space. Raw girders slashed uncompromising angles that made a cage to contain the sky. They divided the sky's windswept turbulence into rectangles and triangular shapes across which cottonwool clouds sailed buoyantly.

The girders were stark and dominant, and the breeze whooped through them.

Far below, Victoria Station was a diminutive toy. To the right of it snaked that miniature river, and the smoke of a toy tug-boat was a wisp of dirty wool that the breeze shredded.

The feel of the ladder was comfortable, familiar. And the carpet-bag nudged his shoulder with angular pressures of well-tended tools.

Them tools — fuff — nobody else shan't 'ave 'em, any road.

The tools would lie idle from tomorrow onwards. But rust should not claim them, they would be kept oiled and honed. And handled, handled.

Oo, dunno — bit dog in the manger, p'raps? Might give 'em to young Alf.

No; not Alf. You packed up after something like half a century and it was good will all round. But still there was a limit and young Alf was it, with his sloppy haircut and take-it-easy airs.

These youngsters they — fuff — oh lor — dunno 'ow to treat good tools.

There was a familiar knot on the side of the ladder, and his thumb dwelt on it.

Well — Bert, then? Steadier than Alf, young Bert. Only a lad, yes; but straight-grained, like a bit of honest timber. Orl right then, young Bert shall 'ave me tools.

The breeze was freshening. It lay in ambush, then came in quick bouts of boisterous horseplay. It slapped his face, buffeted the greened vintage bowler. It chopped capriciously, and the snowy apron that had contoured his thighs whiplacked sideways.

Down below where human ants moved he could make out the foreshortened shapes of Bert and young Alf. And that other shape, long shadow aslant across a desert of concrete: Harry, the foreman.

His eyes dwelt on Harry, regretfully but without rancour, while the morning's interview re-enacted itself.

'No good, Joe. Sorry, old 'un: time to pack in.'

'But Harry boy, just till this contract's—'

'Oh yeah? *'Just till this contract's finished.'* Know how long you bin playin' that tune, old timer? Look, 'ave a bit of sense. Knockin' up sixty-five's no sort of age for these 'ere 'igh-elevation jobs.'

'But Harry, me 'ands is still as steady's a rock. And I do know me trade.'

'Cor stone the ruddy crows, anyone ever said y' didn't?' Young Alf lounged past, whistling '*Saratoga Samba*'.

Harry said awkwardly: 'Trouble is we want *speed* nowa-

days, old 'un. And it ain't in you. Let's face it. Got a noo carpenter comin' on, s'morning. You c'n finish that up-top job you're on, an' that'll be the last. Sorry, Joe . . .'

The breeze whooped through that stark framework of girders. Sunshine gilded the mountainous clouds and a cloud-shadow trailed across Victoria Station.

Well, it was something to be up here just once more, with a bit of skilled work to do. No sense in going all the way down when the noon break came, either — much better eat up here, alone. His hand touched the apron pocket where a cheese-roll was stowed.

'Sparrer, she'll miss 'er crumbs though,' he thought, remembering the stump-tailed hen-sparrow that had grown so tame she would take food from his hands. Who'd feed her after—

His mouth tightened under the yellowed white profusion of moustache. Best stop thinking. Best get started on the final job.

The job waited on the far side of the new structure's shell that was a sheer void criss-crossed by girders. The way to the job was across a fourteen-inch girder spanning the gulf.

He settled the tool-bag on his shoulder, jammed the bowler hard down and took the first accustomed steps out over the void.

The breeze had waited for this moment. It snatched at his apron. And his hand went to the dinner-parcel in the apron's pocket, with a quick movement that threw him momentarily out of poise.

Recovering balance, he looked down.

The breeze sneaked into ambush. Everything waited. Everything swayed, very slightly. Even those cloud-mountains swayed in the sky.

'Blamed silly thing t' do.' He groped for a handkerchief to mop away the sudden sweat above his eyes.

The breeze darted gleefully. The handkerchief flapped in space and went down — dipping, swaying.

All the world was swaying.

His knees flexed, cautiously. With desperate concentration he watched hands that no longer seemed to belong to him as they touched the girder. And now his arms clasped it. Pressing against it, the brim of his bowler bent a little and the pressure of its eased—

The hat went down, bouncing off a cross-girder to dash against another and another.

If I . . . pass out . . . come over faint, like?

Down there, those human ants were scurrying.

Don't never move that fast, not them chaps — not 's a rule. Spotted me? Seen me 'at falling, maybe.

Yes, the ants were active down below. That one was Bert; that other, young Alf. Bert, pointing up. Alf . . . *not doing . . . anything . . .*

Daylight came back as a tiny point of brightness that spread. He belched, and his arms laced themselves again about the girder on either side of which they had been hanging. Miles ahead along the girder a head appeared and Bert's hand waved. From somewhere behind sounded the clump of boots on ladder-rungs and then Alf's thin complaining whine: *'Nice ruddy do — wot the 'ell do they think I . . .'*

Bert was standing on the girder now. He had cupped his hands and was shouting across to Alf while the breeze snatched at his words: *' . . . both get to him, then . . . hands on his shoulders . . . Okay?'*

No! No they mustn't!

He said feebly: *'Oh my — errch! — Gorsake, no. Try*

'n make me move an' I — can't move. Lose me nerve, send 'em both ruddy over . . .'

Down below a sparkle of glass and metal hinted at Victoria Station. Those parading white clouds seemed much nearer than Victoria Station.

Bert was shuffling a nonchalant tap-dance on the girder's far end. He called, grinning: 'S'easy, dad — see? Now do a bit o' shut-eye while we—'

No they mustn't risk it!

He found his voice: 'Listen, you're youngsters. Gotcher lives in front of you. Lemme alone, sec? Lose me ruddy nerve if you. . . . Stands t' reason, don't it? Well then get on down. And you, young Alf — *get . . . on . . . down!*'

Something whirled across vision and came dizzily back in a slow swoop so that he had to close his eyes. When he looked again a sparrow watched, beady-eyed, from midway across the girder.

He said querulously: 'You ain't the one. Cock-sparrer. Where's y'r missus? It's 'er I feeds.'

And time stood still. Bland light from the indifferent sun penetrated rosily the thin film of cyclids. *Sparrow, sparrow. . . .* Something about '*many sparrows*' . . . Well — what? '*Are ye not worth many . . .*'

He began in a reedy whisper: '. . . Father, . . . art in 'eaven . . . *Gawd, please.* I'm a carpenter, sec? So was You once. '*Elp me.* Don't let them youngsters come out t' me. Can't answer for meself if they do — Lose me nerve, sec? Tip the lot of us over. So don't go lettin' 'em risk their bloomin' necks. *Don't let 'em, Gawd. And 'elp me, 'elp me . . .*'

Bert called: 'All set, Alf? Come on then, get cracking. I said — *get cracking!*'

There was nothing now in all the world except that rosy

light fluttering through closed eyelids. He said reproachfully: 'Alf, you ruddy young fool. Told y' not to. Well you be careful of y'self, young Alf . . .'

The firmness of concrete felt good underfoot. He pressed the soles of his boots on it, refusing to sit down. 'These youngsters. Can't tell 'em nothing — just do as they dam' like, slap-bang. Young Alf shovin' me along like that — might've lost me nerve, tipped the both of us over, see?'

Bert said gently: 'S'all right, dad. Alf didn't have the guts. Did it on y'r own, like a flippin' hero, that's what. And—'

'But I . . . But — 'ands on me shoulders. *I felt 'em there:*
...'

They had given him back the battered bowler. He bared his head. And they stood by grinning awkwardly, not understanding and finding nothing to say.

LEO ROBERTSON

Only a Pair of Shoes

MUTU was a simple, unlettered Coringhi coolie from the Madras coast — one of the many emigrants who cross the Bay of Bengal every year to Rangoon to get a few annas a day more than they could earn in their own over-populated country. There he lived in a thatch-roofed, mud hovel; in Rangoon he fared no better in shockingly over-crowded coolie barracks. His whole wardrobe consisted of a pair of cotton loin-cloths and a twist of coloured rag for headgear.

For the first few years of his existence as a labourer in the docks or rice-mills Mutu had no thought for anything beyond earning his scanty living. His only extravagance was occasional drinks of *shamshu* or palm-toddy when he had enough cash to indulge in this taste for spirituous liquor. There came a period of depression when he found himself without a job. Mutu soon had to tighten the string round his waist, secured to which in a pouch made of a scrap of cloth he carried all his monetary wealth, now shrunk to a few copper coins. It was while he was in this predicament, and altogether too dumb to know where to turn next, that his friend, Poonaswamy, came to his aid with some inside information. Poonaswamy told him that if he was quick about it he could possibly obtain a job as one of the sweepers at the new Circus which had just arrived in Town.

‘Not only will you be paid one rupee and eight annas a day,’ said Poonaswamy, ‘but you will be given a coat

edged with braid, and a pair of trousers to wear. Just think of it, trousers like those of any Sahib.'

Mutu had never been to a circus in his life, nor even to a zoo. Elephants he had seen occasionally working in the saw-mill timber-yards, and tame bears performing in the streets, but never such beasts as camels and giraffes and kangaroos. Neither had he seen tigers and lions and leopards. He accompanied Poonaswamy to the great white tent on the *Maidan*. To his surprise he was taken on at once as a temporary sweeper, and handed out a uniform consisting of a pair of brown trousers and a braided coat. His task and that of his fellow-sweepers was the very lowly one of keeping the circus-ring and the grounds clear of all litter and the droppings of the performing animals. Easy enough for him whose work as a dock coolie was ten times more strenuous, and far less interesting.

It was a few days later, when he had got used to the coat and trousers, that Mutu was suddenly overcome by a desire to wear a pair of shoes — shiny shoes like those of the sahibs who came to see the Circus. But one rupee and eight annas a day was far too little to enable him to save enough to purchase even a pair of cheap canvas shoes. And then, would he, a mere menial servant, be allowed to wear them if he got them?

About a week after Mutu had become a circus hand, he was ordered to sweep out the cages of the lions and tigers, a task which was performed with a hose and long-handled brooms thrust through the bars. Mutu had had no experience of this work, for his duties had been confined so far to the Ring itself and to the grounds. Entering the tent where the wheeled cages were, he surveyed the great cats there, for to Mutu's simple way of seeing things this was no figure of speech. Big cats they were to him and nothing

more. Bruce, the formidable Bengal tiger, lay dozing in his cage. Mutu made up his mind to clean it first. Fetching a bucket of water and a short broom, he opened the cage and climbed in. With sleepy eyes Bruce looked at the intruder who took no notice of him. Having sluiced out and swabbed a portion of the cage, Mutu went up to Bruce and tried to push him aside with his feet. 'Get out of my way, you lazy brute,' he exclaimed in Telegu.

Bruce got up lazily, and moving to a corner of his cage, lay down again. But not to rest undisturbed for long, for Mutu having scrubbed the part from which he had dislodged the tiger, again shoved him aside unceremoniously in order to complete his task. He was not, however, unobserved, for Luigi, the lion-tamer, summoned by one of the attendants, had been quietly watching him for some time, unwilling to interrupt this unrehearsed performance for fear of some mishap. But his showman's mind was at work.

'What an act it would make if this lout were to enter the cage at the nightly shows, and do no more than what he was doing now — a clownish act, and yet a breath-taking one.' So ran his thoughts, which resulted in Mutu's being promoted from menial servant to a circus turn. Seventy-five rupees a month — gross underpayment, of course, but for Mutu a magnificent sum.

For five nights he entered the cage casually as a sweeper, and pushed the great Bengal tiger about as it if were a lazy cat or a good-natured dog. He did not need to act — it was a comic turn in itself.

With the receipt of the advance which his friend, Poonaswamy, put him up to demanding, Mutu at last achieved his ambition, and bought a pair of flashy patent-leather shoes. Luigi at first objected to his appearing for

his turn in shoes. But Mutu, now rapidly developing a personality, not without encouragement from Poonaswamy, stipulated 'no shoes, no turn!'

The shoes squeaked, and did not fit Mutu too well. They hurt him too, for never in all his life had his calloused feet been shod in any way. He hobbled about the cage in his noisy shoes, sending the spectators into fits of laughter. Luigi did not regret having given way to Mutu's whim. It vastly improved the act. But Bruce did not seem to like the innovation. The squeaks irritated him, and he snarled several times to express his disapproval. But when the unsteady Mutu trod on his tail, he could stand no more. Springing on him he bit him severely on the left arm.

It was the end of Mutu's turn as a circus turn — the end too of his career as an able-bodied coolie. With one arm amputated he could earn but half of what he did before his brief period of circus stardom. But Mutu is a simple man; he is content with his lot. He no longer has any ambitions — not even to wear a pair of shoes.

DILYS ROWE

A View Across The Valley

WHAT was left was a presence in a room where all the wood was scrubbed white. The presence, already disembodied, had assumed a power it never had before. It was hard for those present to know what they felt in the presence of an event so difficult to understand, so impossible to reconstruct. Feelings ran like mercury between compassion and awe. Fortunately routine provides a set of phrases and even a tone of voice which concealed this confusion. Time that morning was short. The man considering the case said he must ask himself what else it could be but misadventure; he found no answer, he said. No one unfortunately would have been likely to pass by that place, not at that time of day and on a Sunday. He paused again and found the next part of the formula. All too often, he went on, in that place the deaths of children came before him, but it would have been unfair in this case to expect the parents to start a search immediately because a girl whose habits must have been a little out of the ordinary did not return in time for her lunch. He sighed and made a gesture with his open hand. He was disgruntled like a good workman who had not been given the right tools for the job. He was returning this verdict, he said, because they did not know what went on up there.

The child had been alone on the slope of the hill. She drew all her hair down before her face, pressed her chin to her neck, and knelt there for something to do in the brazen afternoon. Through the back of her neck the sun

drove a boomerang of light grown solid, a creature consumed by light, as light had consumed the pieces of white hot metal pulled out of the furnace to amuse her as she stood at the foundry door. They would pick them out for her on the long tongs, shapes like toys distorted and fantastic, shapes pure with light and possessed by it; they held them out to her so that the heat flew at her face like an angry swan restrained. She felt the white-hot boomerang now probing through her neck to meet her chin at the other side. She pressed her chin still closer. She created dusk with the heavy curtain of hair, and at the day's height she put out the sun. It was a new state of being, and labouring with her breath she enjoyed to the full its exquisite pain. She opened her eyes to the thick falling hair, blew on it and felt the moisture returning from it to her face. She shook it three times. It swung in its own weight like a pendulum, and then hung still. Sweat started on her forehead and spread. When it became unbearable she raised her head and through the hair falling back around her face she saw the scar cut by the valley white after her own dusk, until in a moment the sun drenched it again.

She hitched up at her waist the green pleated skirt which the last wind before the heat of the day blew against her legs. Haze was beginning to rise on the summer Sunday. Occasionally gorse cracked in the heat. It must have been between one and two o'clock because below nobody was moving in the toy streets. She saw the tower of feathers where a train crawled on its stomach amongst the black hulks of the steel works and the bright red boxes of the new factories. A car visible only in the sun's searchlight moved where a road must be. From the cemetery something too small to see, a glass shade it may be with two dirty joined

hands inside it, flashed her the living sun from amongst its deaths. No one moved in the streets. They were all in their houses stifling in the fumes from roast beef, lamb and mint, hot jam and rhubarb. The valley had life as a wound has microbes, but not on a Sunday between one and two o'clock. Stripped of its power, it lay harmless and neutral in the sun.

She was high above it where woods had been, where there was nothing to wreck. Somewhere behind her foxes and badgers played, and beyond that further than she could walk there was a lake. But only men with their heads in the clouds and gentle happy madmen would use this right of way with wind strumming in their ears when there were other ways in and out of the valley. And so it was no part of the landscape where the girl was now. Where she was four white clovers might spring up in all her footsteps, or she might be a girl conjured for convenience out of flowers. But she was not. She was a girl who was out at a forbidden time on the muted Welsh Sunday.

From her pockets she took the six bracelets. She put three on each arm and shook them towards the sun. She held her thin arms out and admired them hanging at her wrists, then pushed them hard up her arm as far as each would go. The sharp edges cut into the white freckled flesh. She had chosen them carefully for their graded sizes, two from jam jars, two from jars of chutney and two from jars of fish paste. She pulled them down again to the wrists and ran her fingers through the grooves of the red weals, three on identical places on each arm. She sat on, above the valley, shackled in the six bracelets.

From here the river was only a river, winding its way on a map through the lie of the land. Its banks were not

doomed by memories of old deaths; it was not a place where pitiful drowned dogs covered with the grey plush that is left of them show the holes of their eyes. Down the valley the viaduct leapt in three great bounds across it, and she could see now that when trains stopped on it, sprawled in their monstrous immobility, people would be up there with their heads well out of the smoke, parcelled eight at a time in little boxes. In a musty book which might have been the only one an illiterate old man long dead had in his house for sentimental reasons, she had once seen a drawing on a page hanging off the thin cords of the binding. 'A landscape in Tuscany,' it said, showing a long arched bridge in the fields with hills behind it. This might have been a landscape in Tuscany under the sun.

Time in this new dimension of sun and space was long and vacant, solid so that she felt she could have cut it into little blocks. She was appalled by the length the afternoon would be. She cupped her hand and called, not seriously thinking that at this time it would bring the others up to her from the valley. Calling still she beat her hand against the sound. She was the child the children follow in the streets; when they form their little groups conferring against walls, it is she who bends the lowest in the centre and walks first away, upright carrying the threat and the secret of the destruction they have planned. If she says there are to be no spitting games today nobody spits for the furthest, the longest, the slowest, although the game has been devised by her. To this call they did not come.

But it was then for the first time that the hare showed itself, its haste less like fear than the movement of a dance. Seeing her he ran back to the slope below all in the flick of his tail. She went to the place where she had left her shoes and made on them the two crosses for seeing a hare.

She took them off again, and threw herself down with her face into the sun. Turning she watched the leather of her shoe lapping up the crosses for as long as, in a more familiar dimension, a kitten would take to drink its saucer of milk. Then time came over her again, and pressing her fingers to her eye-balls she walked about in the yellow halls behind her eyes in the greatest nothing she had never seen.

Into the depths of this endless time she threw at random one thought after another and watched them ripple slowly outwards and outwards in the lazy afternoon. It was between one and two o'clock on a Sunday in the whole long history of the world, and the moment that had just passed and this minute had gone for ever into the whole world's past. There would never be another time when one girl and one only, 13 years and 6½ days old, would be lying alone on the hill hungry and damp from the sun between one and two o'clock. She thought of valleys which are green and fruitful and yellow with corn; a slow river would be winding through green banks. Cowslips would be lying like newly-washed children around it and poplars and larches would be beyond the water meadows. This valley was not green, but sometimes a piece of slag would have the print of a fern stamped deep into it. Sometimes a stream would turn red with copper like the biblical sea or yellow like the Tiber with filth. When the snow came the birds left their confident footprints on the slag heaps mistaking them for hills. When it was two o'clock the hooter sounding between hills sent packs of soiled and sweating men moving through the valley. And when it was dark the furnace opened its inflamed mouth and caught stars for flies.

The vaporous halls behind her eyes turned solid, and

through the skin of her lids she saw the cloud that was passing for a moment over the sun trailing with it a wind that was no more than a message. She sat up. Purple lights blocked her newly opened eyes. When they cleared the hare came again running in the arc of a circle from below. She called to him, and crossed her shoes and ran to where it had disappeared. Licks of flame were playing in the bracken and in the grass at its edge. Over its blazing purity the river was full of the thick and various filth it collected, there were leprous deaths on the grave stones and the black hulks of the steel works were crusted with barnacles of soot and grime. On the canal she could pick out the gallcon, the treasure boat, with the gold breast plates and the rings with stones like blood on the sandals and the bracelets. It was rotting and sodden, the coal barge that had not been used for thirty years. Every year of her life its swollen timbers had become a little more decayed until now their ends were fraying. Sitting in the sun with the fire beginning she remembered one of many deaths. Men stood with ropes and poles for the whole of a day; children looking for sensations as hens peck for anything that comes out of the ground were shooed away only to gather again and again. The boy lay only where he had fallen in the discoloured yellow water. He did not get himself destroyed in a lonely place. He fell quietly, almost under their eyes, with a low wall between him and the road, and the path was there for anybody to be walking on at a lucky time.

But where he fell the barge imprisoned him, weeds parcelled his nine year old body with the awful precision of accident, and the men dragged in shallow water through a whole day, and when they were meant to find him they did find him tangled in weeds. The canal is not

like the sea, the powerful destroyer, returning its dead when the deed has been accomplished. The canal only gives them reluctantly after a struggle covered with the long green slime with which it brands the bodies of dead dogs. The girl was dappled in sunshine and hatred for his wilful destruction. And the hare came again.

He was running now in no hurry, as children run to music when they expect it suddenly to stop. The afternoon had reached its turning. The sun was a blatant disc of light, from which the wind had snatched the warmth to give it to the fire. The fire burnt now on three sides of the hare. The child thought she would look at the sun through a flame. She ran into the middle of the hare's circle to catch a sight of this miracle of miracles. She lay outstretched in the middle of light and the soft unburdened flame leaping and the tireless hare running in his sacrificial pleasure as far away from her as he could go. They all lay about her like gifts she did not deserve. She felt the angry swan straining again for her flesh. She saw the hare moving in now closer to her than he had dared. He was beyond caring now for her presence or she for his. Pleasure moved inside her mounting from the pit of her stomach to her throat in waves of exquisite agony. The wind changed on the turning of the afternoon tide. The fire was already a great bracelet all around her just open for the arm. She lay enchanted, and the circle closed.

ALASTAIR SCOBIE

The Lioness

WE made Kagela by noon that day, parked the hunting car under a candelabra tree, and got the boys on to pitching camp. 'I always camp here,' Benny told me, 'because there's a pool of water there . . .' he jerked his head towards a small clump of ragged palms that grew incongruously from the sand of the desert. We were prospecting for copper, and Benny had found, or thought he had found, a rich ore seam. We had come to stake our claim.

Going down to get water we found the lioness by a still, clear pool, half in shadow. She was dying even then.

Benny raised his rifle, working the bolt smoothly, easily. 'Don't do it,' I said.

'Why not? She can't live.' Benny is thin and stringy as though life in the bush had sweated all the spare flesh off him. He has pale green eyes in a patchy brown face, sun-burned as only a man who has lived his life under an African sun can be. He never uses a tent, but sleeps under the stars wrapped in a blanket roll, despite lion prides and hyenas.

'She's finished,' he said, 'but sun-up she'll be dead as Queen Anne's cat.'

'I know.' I didn't really understand why I wanted to spare the lioness. She lay on her side, thin flanks heaving, the shape of the arched barrel of her ribs protruding through her mangy skin. One flank was torn by a clotted, dark wound and her coat was blank and yellow, without the tawny-grey splendour of a lion in good health. We

walked towards her, rifles up, and she raised the yellow skull of her head and bared her fangs and snarled in her throat. Hate and yellow fire flashed for a second from her eyes, then the wound tore, and she lay silent, waiting for her death.

'She's in cub,' I said. Benny nodded.

'I'm going to shoot a zebra and feed her.'

'You'll be sorry, Al.'

'Maybe. But I want to see what will happen.'

That was the simple way to put it.

About 500 yards away some zebra were grazing along the bank of a dry river. I sighted, aimed, squeezed off, and as the echo of the shot slammed back from the flat face of the bush a stallion rolled over, kicked a moment and lay still. 'Nice shooting,' Benny said. I had got him through the shoulder, smashing the spine and killing him as cleanly as the lioness herself would have done, had she been able to hunt her food.

'You'll be sorry for this, Al,' Benny said again. He was staring at the zebra, his triangular face puckered, green eyes almost closed against the glare.

'Why?'

We walked over towards the zebra together, unsheathing our skinning knives. I matched his long, easy stride.

'Africa is cruel,' he said, 'but the cruelty has purpose. You musn't interfere.'

'Hyenas will tear the old girl apart tonight,' I said, 'whilst she's still alive. Where's the purpose in that?'

He rolled the zebra over. It smelt clean, of grass and dung, like a horse. Its stripes were very bright and the skin fell off easily before the sharp knives. Benny nodded at it.

'This is what the white man has always done,' he said, 'upset the balance. Meddled and messed and upset things.'

Men who would have been great warriors are hotel sweepers, men who would have been voodoo doctors are trade unionists, women who would have suckled warriors at their bare breasts are prostitutes in the mine towns. A lovely picture. All from kindness of heart.'

'You're nuts.' I called back to the camp, a long bush-call, and when my gunbearer emerged on the skyline I motioned him to bring the hunting car.

'Suppose I feed her and she recovers?' I asked Benny, 'what then? The balance isn't upset. She has her cubs and goes off into the bush.'

'With the smell of man on her?'

'All right,' I said, 'I'm a sentimentalist. I still want to give the old girl a chance. But if you feel so strongly she should be killed . . .' He grinned.

'I am not a sentimentalist. One tragedy more or less is nothing to me.'

The hunting car came whining towards us over the bush, in bottom gear. In the sky the first vultures gathered, wheeling far up in the smirchless blue air. Beautiful in flight.

'If she dies, then, it will be a tragedy?' I asked.

'That is not what I meant at all,' he said.

It was easy to feed the lioness. We threw a fresh haunch of zebra to her and she stretched forward and licked, and a bubble of fresh blood followed the rasping of her tongue. Then she leaned sideways and got the leg in her mouth. We went back to the camp and got out sleeping bags, then we dined on bland stew and packaged soup, and afterwards lit our pipes and watched a herd of kongoni going down to the river. Lions were coughing around us all that night.

'If she recovers she'll hang round the camp,' Benny said, 'and a lioness in cub is bad medicine.'

Next day we took ore samples and mapped our claim, feeding the lioness in the morning. She snapped at us and then took the food in her mouth and ate. The wound gaped in her shoulder, and Benny, greatly daring, sprinkled sulphonamide powder into it whilst she tried to get at him with her fangs and claws, growling like a devil the while.

I have seen a man mauled by a lion in less time than it takes to write three words of this account. They are beautiful terrible beasts, with power and speed in them. The cheetah cannot escape a lion, and even a bull rhino cannot survive an encounter with a big lion unscathed; only the elephant can match him.

A lioness in her prime can pick up a 600 lb. heifer and jump a corral fence, without as much as a leg touching the ground. Pound for pound, lions are probably the most powerful animals alive, and are vicious and uncalculable into the bargain. Yet a wild lion can be tamed enough to take food from a car after only a few days' contact with man.

We fed the lioness for a few more days by throwing meat to her, then her wound half-healed and she became too frisky, so we fed her from a long bamboo pole, spiking the meat on the end and holding it out to her. Within a week she was on her feet, staggering around the camp, growling in her throat, waiting for food as if she had a right to it.

One night she came right up to me as I sat in a camp chair, cutting a haunch of buck for her dinner. The hair stood up along my neck. She growled quietly as she came, but took the meat I threw her and purred in her throat, impersonal and happy as a well fed cat.

'God, how tame she is!' I said.

'Sure,' Benny answered, 'but one day she will take you by the arm and maul you, and before I can get a gun you'll be dead.'

'Not her.'

'Very well. You will spoil her for her own kind. She will learn your ways and they will kill her.'

'You blasted pessimist,' I said as the lioness crouched over her meal. 'Why shouldn't she go off into the bush and join her kind? Why shouldn't she hunt again and have her cubs and feed them? Why should things be as you say?'

'Because that's the way it is,' Benny said. His green eyes seemed to reflect the bush and the thorn trees, the sky white with heat and noon, the grey of the land under the vertical sun.

But it seemed he was wrong. The lioness grew powerful and restless. Two nights before we left the waterhole she was sitting, couched like a great house cat, before the fire when, far away and like the ghost of Africa itself, came a faint cough of a male lion hunting his supper. She stood suddenly, her tail swishing delicately in easy flicks, the black tuft stirring dust from the sand. She swung her great head with its cruel eyes, and in the firelight they seemed almost like the eyes of Benny himself, green and withdrawn and somehow waiting, as if the mind behind the eyes was listening always for a known summons that must come, and that, coming, must be obeyed.

For a long moment she stood there swishing her tufted tail. On her side the wound had healed into a dark, ragged scar, and she walked easily now, powerfully. Her strength was with her, her slack, white-furred belly distended with the weight of cubs, soon to be born.

Slowly, slowly she turned from us. She listened to the voice of the lion, there in the bush. Then she walked off out of the range of the firelight, never once looking back, moving silently on her great, soft pads, the camp boys shrinking from her as she passed them without even looking at them. Then she was a shadow amongst hunting shadows under the moon, and we heard her voice that night amongst the rocks and the thorn trees.

And that should be the ending of the story. A lovely, happy ending. The lioness going off to meet her mate, healed and strong, ready for the chase, the kill, feast, the birth of her cubs. It is not the end of the story; that is more true and at once more pitiful. It would be satisfactory to leave the happy ending; but this was what really happened.

Our ore samples were approved. Months later a syndicate put up the money for the development of our claim, and we went back to the Kagela waterhole (there is a tiny settlement there now!) to start operations. When we camped we were not thinking of the lioness, but we went down to the waterhole, as we had done before, to fill up our jerricans. There we found all Africa had left of our lioness. There was her skeleton, the hard, bony muzzle touching the water. Benny tumbled her poor bones apart with his rifle.

‘Satisfied?’ he asked me, drily.

‘She came to be fed,’ I whispered, ‘poor soul. She trusted us, and we were not here, and so she starved to death!’

Benny nodded towards the mute skull, ‘She trusted us, and we failed her. It was no fault of ours. It is no fault of ours if we have failed Africa.’

I looked amongst the bones.

'But by the living God,' I said, 'her cubs have been born.'

And it was so. There were no foetus-skeletons amongst her bones. Her cubs had gone; perhaps to die in the mouth of a hyena, perhaps to starve on that bare plain, perhaps — for any lioness with young cubs is always ready to turn foster-mother — to live and roar over those long, tawny plains that were old when the human race was young.

If they lived I have lions to my credit! I like to think they are alive. At Kagela, after a hard day's work, changing to go down to the newly-built club for a long, iced drink, I hear the lions roaring sometimes, particularly in the echoing, wet nights of the grass rains. Then I, poor sentimentalist, like to dream that they are her cubs, hunting under the white moon of Africa.

DAL STIVENS

In The Depths

A BRIGHT young mullet was yarning to a friend one day in a giant cave on the sea bed when a shadow moved across the sand and it grew dark.

'Quick!' cried the friend. 'Into the crevice!'

Inside the crevice the friend explained: 'It's that big fish. We'll take a look out but be careful he doesn't see us!'

The bright young mullet and his friend undulated cautiously to the lips of the crevice and peeped out. A large green fish was swimming slowly up and down outside the cave, stopping every now and then, head on, to peer inside, while his tail fanned the sand on the sea bed.

'Look at those teeth!' said the friend. 'How hungry are his red eyes!' The mullet, however, went on evenly enough, 'While we are in here we are safe so there's nothing to worry about. We mullet have been doing this for years so we shouldn't grumble.'

'But how dreadful!' exclaimed the bright young mullet, waving his fins excitedly. 'Suppose we were a bit slow getting into the crevice.'

'We should have no more worries,' said the other, resignedly. 'The thing is not to be too slow, that's all.'

'Why, it's intolerable!' cried the bright young mullet hotly, dilating his dorsal fins. 'That we should have to skulk like this! Something must be done about that fish.'

'I shouldn't upset myself!' said the other. 'I have never seen him come into the cave, let alone catch and eat any of us.'

'It is still intolerable,' said the bright young mullet.

'One day he undoubtedly will. You have only to look at those teeth like needles and those hot eyes to see what he is thinking.'

The large green fish was in fact a vegetarian and merely very inquisitive. He peaked into the cave for a few more minutes, during which the flukes of his tail shuffled up the sand, and then swam away.

'You saw the strength in that tail!' said the bright young mullet. 'That settles it! We must organize!'

'To what end?' asked the other, wearily. 'There's nothing we can do except do as we have always done. I must say it has proved quite effective.'

'That's the past,' said the bright young mullet. 'But what of the future? Ah, there I have you! No, we must put up a show of strength.'

Whereupon the bright young mullet called a meeting of all the other mullet in the cave, talked to them earnestly of their peril, and then propounded his scheme.

'There are some thousands of us and with numbers we can put up a show of strength,' he said, flapping his fins about. 'We must simulate the shape of fish, two and three times as large as our enemy. Then he will not dare to attack us. We must have a rehearsal now because there is no time to be lost.'

Stirred by his words, the other mullet did as he suggested, and formed themselves into the frame of a giant fish. They had barely done this under the impatient commands of the bright young mullet, and were practising fearsome grunts in unison, when the large green fish came back to have another peck. What he saw there, terrified him so much that he cracked up several tons of sand with his tail as he fled.

Choking and coughing from the sand, the bright young

mullet addressed his followers: 'You see now what a dangerous fellow this is and what weapons he uses against us!'

The green fish, meanwhile, was swimming in terror of his life and was saying to himself: 'But this is dreadful! That monster in the cave is clearly intent on devouring me and anyone else in sight. No one but a fool would think otherwise after hearing those blood-curdling yells. What shall become of me?'

In his distress he remembered the fish he regarded as his great uncle. In truth there was no blood relationship for this other was a huge shark.

'Uncle!' gasped the green fish. 'Are you hungry? There's a big fish in the cave that would make a fine meal for you.'

The shark who had been woken from a sleep immediately stifled a yawn.

'You bring me welcome news, nephew,' he said. 'I haven't eaten since yesterday.' Then he added cautiously, 'But just how big is this fish?'

'Quite big,' said the green fish. 'But no trouble to you, Uncle.'

'Is it far to the cave?'

'Quite far, Uncle, but no distance to a swimmer like you.'

'I don't think I could make the effort on an empty stomach, nephew,' said the shark. 'On the other hand, I am famished. I am most sorry it has to be you, nephew, but it's nature's fault, not mine. You simply can't stand against her.'

Whereupon the shark opened his mouth and engulfed the big green fish.

The following afternoon the shark felt hungry once

more. He was also a little alarmed. 'If this fish in the cave is really as big as my poor nephew said, well I'd better take a look at him,' he told himself. After upbraiding himself for a couple of hours on his lack of backbone, he set off for the cave.

What he saw and heard there — the mullet had improved considerably on their earlier show of strength — made the huge shark's blood run even colder than normal and in his flight his tail buffeted so much sand into the cave the little fish were almost suffocated.

'But it's horrendous!' cried the huge shark, breathlessly. 'No fish is safe from that fell monster. I distinctly heard him threaten to devour all the fish in the seven seas.'

In his unsharked state, he teetered distractedly about in circles for some hours, asking himself what he must do.

Meanwhile the bright young mullet was telling his followers: 'Our enemies are clearly making bigger and better weapons. You saw how much sand that fearsome brute hurled at us. We must organize all the mullet in the neighbouring caves, in the whole sea — in all the seas, if necessary. We must ally the sea snakes to us, the electric eels, the rays, the porcupine fish, the lampreys, the crabs, the shellfish, the sprats, the herrings, the sardines, the whitebait, even the sea slugs — in fact, all who value their safety and their liberty. We must simulate the shape of an even bigger fish. We must do this instantly because our enemies will band together and unless we put on a show of strength we will be utterly undone.'

This all the mullet set about doing. They made pacts with all the small fish in the caves for some hundreds of leagues and sent delegations further afield.

'Soon we shall be invulnerable!' declared the bright young mullet.

On the afternoon of their first combined rehearsal all the sharks in the seven seas fearfully attacked them. Only a handful of mullet and other small fish escaped. Among those who perished were the bright young mullet and his friend. Most of the sharks perished too, from a surfeit of lampreys and other even less edible fish.

ROBERT WALLER

The Hole in the Clock

My father, who was a radical politician, kept all the clocks in our home at five to the hour. His influence was so dominating and persuasive that we children believed that in our house it was always 'five to'.

When I was 11 years old, I dreamed that I climbed up to the mantelpiece, took the face and works out of the clock, and saw a wonderful valley that seemed to go on for ever. I do not know whether I was more thrilled or terrified. I put back the face and the works at once; for I knew that if my father caught me, I would never be forgiven. I was so frightened that I trembled even in my sleep, and thrust back the works so hastily that I broke them. But it seemed that everyone pretended the clock was really working, although the hands were kept at one position; so I put them at five to, and knew that I should not be found out. The next day I examined the real clock that I dreamed I had taken to pieces, and it was not going.

When my father came home that evening, he glanced, as usual, at the clock and exclaimed, as usual, 'My God, it's five to already! There's no time to waste!' He looked at me sternly: 'Johnny, can't you see the time? Go and start your homework at once.' As I went out of the room I knew my father's spell over me was broken; indeed I felt angry with him; but I was afraid and I kept my knowledge and my indignation a secret. From that time, too, my parents' attitude toward me changed, as if they sensed that something had changed in me; they frequently told

me I was the most selfish child that any family had ever had.

A little while after my dream, one of my father's colleagues came to dinner. He was called, I remember, an extremist. He told us all that there was no God; only the will of the individual to create from moment to moment. 'You can call the world God, if you like, because the world controls us. But we are learning to control the world; so we are the final Gods.'

My father maintained the world had been created by a great mind that wound it up and left it to run down like a clock. 'In my opinion,' said our guest heatedly, 'you're putting the clock back with views like that.'

'Me, putting the clock back! Me! when I've always lived on the principle that it's five to!'

'It's more than five to: the hour has struck. For those who are ready, the hour is always striking. How typical of a social progressive to say it is five to!'

When his colleague had gone, my father seemed sad. 'Of course, George is right really,' he told us. 'It's a question of temperament. To live at five to is a strain one can only just manage; to live on the hour would be impossible.' We could see nevertheless that he felt guilty.

As he grew older my father complained of a roaring in the ears, which was sometimes so loud that he could not hear what people were saying. He twice had his ears syringed; but this made no difference and an ear specialist was sent for. The visit of the specialist excited me: I felt sure that he was going to tell my father that there was nothing wrong with his ears. And this indeed happened; he told him he was imagining the noises. My father laughed scornfully. The specialist then looked rather sly and said, 'There is one other possibility; I will send another

specialist to you. You will find him perhaps rather strange; but I have confidence in him.'

My father consented, on condition that the specialist swore that he would not divulge to anyone his theory that the noises were imagined. 'It would ruin my standing in the cabinet.' The specialist looked shocked at the suggestion that he could not keep a professional secret. 'There is always the leak through one's wife,' said my father apologetically. 'Politicians are always news, even when their diseases are much duller than other people's.'

The new specialist did not even trouble to examine my father's ears; he said it wasn't necessary.

'So you too think there is nothing wrong with me?' my father remarked grimly. 'Then let us waste no more time.' He glanced at the clock.

The specialist looked at him with a calm, ironic smile and then also glanced at the clock. 'I think you are seriously ill.'

My father was taken aback. 'But . . . you admit yourself . . .'

'The symptoms indicate that it will be difficult to cure you; but not, I hope, impossible. As usual it will depend on the patient.'

'That's easy to say. Tell me what it is. I must know at once. Don't conceal anything.' He rapped with his fingers on the table and showed all his customary signs of impatience.

The specialist continued to survey him with exasperating tranquility. 'You sometimes dream, don't you, that you are travelling in an express train? It is going so fast that the countryside is just a blur through the carriage windows, and the noise of the wheels is so loud that you cannot hear yourself talk.'

My father stopped drumming on the table; he seemed instantly reminded of something. 'Good Heavens, yes! I never realized it, but I must have dreamed that; it calls to mind such a vivid, familiar picture. How extraordinary!' He looked at the specialist with a new respect.

'The noise in your ears is the same noise as the noise in your dreams.'

'Preposterous! And yet it is a similar noise. Well, then, what can I do to stop it . . . this noise . . . this dream? I must dream more often than I imagined.' My father looked angry with himself, as if he had been guilty of lack of self-control.

The specialist, carefully watching everything he did, laughed. 'I'm sorry if I make you laugh,' said my father. 'I was beginning to be impressed by what you were saying.'

'I laughed because I saw you making up your mind to control your dreams. You can only do that by changing your life. I warned you, the cure is radical.'

My father's curiosity battled with his irritation. 'I have always preached radical action; I trust I shall not be found incapable of it in my own life.'

'When I tell you the cure, I consider it probable you will order me out of the house. So would you please send for my hat and coat and I will put them on first.'

My father did as he was requested. 'We must honour you great brains, I suppose.' He laughed genially in his best front bench manner.

The specialist quietly put on his coat and held his hat in one hand; then he moved over to the door and as he turned the handle said: 'All you have to do is to put your clocks right.'

'The clocks . . . ! Tomfoolery . . . '

But the specialist had gone.

When my mother came in, she found my father looking pale, but in fits of laughter. 'Good job we've got those fellows under state control,' he said. 'They can't soak the public now like they used to.'

'What did he say?' my mother asked anxiously.

'Had the nerve to try and persuade me I was seriously ill; me! Said I could only be cured if I started the clocks again. Did you ever hear such quackery! One of these psychiatrists, I suppose. Ought to be made illegal.'

My mother looked doubtful; she always found it inconvenient having the clocks at five to.

'I dare say the fellow's trying to ruin me,' my father ruminated. 'Doesn't like my new proposals for the health bill — 'Don't pay while you die.' They're all reactionaries in the medical profession.'

Father, with much joking, recounted to us at lunch what the specialist had said. Afterwards I went for a long walk to think about this; for I knew the specialist was right. With childish innocence and boldness, I called at the specialist's house.

'Have you come with a message from your father?' he asked me.

'No, I wanted to ask you a question myself.'

'Oh good; I'm delighted.' He looked at me with kindly amusement, but seriously too. 'Please sit down.' He fetched me a chair himself. I sat on the edge, awkwardly; but he sat down at his ease, as if it were perfectly normal to have schoolboys dropping in to ask him questions.

'Well, what is it?'

'What will happen to my father if he doesn't stop pretending it is five to?'

'So you don't think he will?'

'No, I'm sure he won't. It would make things so quiet.'

He wouldn't know what to do with himself.'

The specialist leant forward. 'It would be as if a racing car engine which keeps life going had stopped?'

I nodded.

The specialist took his pipe out of his pocket and considered me as he stuffed it with tobacco. 'Have you looked through the hole in the clock?' he asked me casually.

Fancy him knowing that! I was so overcome with a feeling of love that I could not speak.

'Since I see you have, you will understand the Time-diseases, even though you are too young to calculate what the time is in Australia now. Real Time is not an intellectual problem, but an experience, just like falling in love is an experience. Your father, like most people, has either not had the experience or, if he has had it — and I rather suspect most people do, to some extent anyway — he is waging a war against it. He keeps this a secret from himself of course.'

I nodded.

'Time on the clock level is only the arena of the human drama,' he continued as if talking to himself. 'But the acts of that drama must go their own pace.' Then I saw him give a slight start. 'I suppose you can tell the time?'

I blushed and confessed that I could not, and that at school I was regarded as a bit of a freak for this reason, for otherwise I was quite clever.

'Of course,' said the specialist with a grave tenderness, 'I should have known. How silly of me; an inevitable compensation.'

I looked at him inquiringly.

'You'll have to learn, old boy; for in the same way as your father can't hear anything but a rushing torrent, you

will have times when all sounds are muffled and meaningless.'

'That happens to me sometimes now.'

'I'm glad you came — but there's no need to tell your family. This is just between you and me. Your family is evidently one that is destined to deal with the problem of Time. As for your father, I'm afraid he will try to carry on with his customary life, until the torrent of time becomes so loud he will be forced to retire. For true knowledge never comes until after the catastrophe.'

'And shall I have a catastrophe?'

He smiled. 'If you can learn that the tyranny of time must be accepted in spite of the timeless vision, I think I can reduce it to a crisis.' He paused. 'I think that is really enough just now. When you have learnt to tell the time come and see me again — and bring me some of your dreams; for there we find the intersection of time and Time.'

It was as he said. The rushing noise in my father's ears became so violent that he had to retire just when, as Minister for Education, he was preparing to force a new bill through the house in record time. The aim of the bill was to make it possible for children to matriculate by the time they were 13 and pass through the universities and services before they were twenty. In this way he was confident that we should not only be the best educated country in the world, but that we should not lose military strength and productive manpower either. The minister who took my father's place was not able to work at such a pressure — although father begged him to put all his clocks at five to — and the bill was not fully prepared at the last session before a general election.

My father realized that this would happen, and the day

that he had to resign was in a bitter state of mind. 'After all I've done to help my country; after I've striven to do good always working against time, this is how Fate treats me! How can one believe in Divine Providence?' Then noticing me in the room he added, 'Even my children laugh at me, their own father, who began at the bottom and battled to the top.'

My mother was trying to soothe him and find consolations in his retirement. 'Think of all the time you will have to yourself, dear.'

'Time,' he shouted dramatically, 'that is lost for ever. Put the clocks right. Let the dull world go its own slow way. And as for you,' he said, looking at me severely, 'you're a disgrace to our educational system. I hope you've learnt to tell the time by now?'

'I learnt before you, father,' I replied smiling.

DOROTHY WHIPPLE

Saturday Afternoon

GEORGE THORPE had always gone out on Saturday afternoon. His wife and his daughter Muriel expected him to go out — to go to his club, or play golf or watch cricket matches, or whatever it was he did. When he went, they didn't ask where he was going, and when he came back, they didn't ask where he had been. They were comfortably indifferent to what George did, so long as he got out of the way. They liked the afternoon to themselves on Saturday; they liked to settle down in the sitting-room or the garden, according to the weather, and knit and read and eat chocolates in peace.

Lately, however, George had shown a disinclination to go out, and they'd had to get him off in spite of himself.

'You'd better put your coat on today, George,' said Mrs Thorpe at lunch one chilly Saturday.

'I didn't think of going out,' said George, looking at the grey sky.

But after lunch Muriel brought his coat. She and her mother helped him into it and gave him his hat and kissed him.

'Enjoy yourself,' said Mrs Thorpe, as she always did, and when he had gone, Muriel slewed the sofa round to the sitting-room fire for her mother and drew up an armchair for herself.

They looked at George going down the drive — a familiar figure, stooping against the east wind, the fingers of one long, thin hand spread over the crown of his hat to keep it on.

'I don't know what's happened to him,' said Muriel. 'He seems to want to stay at home now on Saturday afternoons.'

'Well, he's not going to,' said Mrs Thorpe, putting her feet up on the sofa. 'Men should go out on Saturday afternoons, after they've been in their offices all week. He'd do nothing but fidget if he stayed in. He must keep up his interests.'

'Oh, I'm all for it,' said Muriel, opening a box of chocolates, although the lunch they had just finished had been hearty. 'Have one?'

'Thanks,' said her mother.

'I suppose he's feeling a bit old,' said Muriel.

'Old?' said Mrs Thorpe indignantly. 'He's the same age as I am, which is fifty-four. I don't feel old, and what's more I don't think I look it.'

'Oh, you!' said Muriel with affectionate banter. 'You're one of the world's wonders.'

They were great friends — two strapping women, as alike as two peas except that Muriel was much the younger pea, being half the age of her mother. Both had ginger hair, light eyelashes, solid ankles, and good teeth often fully exposed in laughter. They chivvied and chipped each other with the greatest good humour. It was fun to come across them in the town, where they would stand laughing and talking to their friends, with always some tale to tell against each other or poor old George. They made George sound quite funny, though no one else found him so — a quiet, self-effacing man who seemed to live only to provide his wife and daughter with plenty of the best of everything.

In the sitting-room this afternoon, Mrs Thorpe and Muriel were very comfortable. The novel soon slipped

from Mrs Thorpe's hand: she dozed. Muriel didn't doze at her age. She read, a hand going out now and again to the chocolates. The fire flapped softly. On the mantelpiece, the clock ticked time away. It ticked to half-past three without notice.

'Bother!' said Muriel suddenly, lifting her head from her book. 'There's a man coming up the drive.'

Mrs Thorpe frowned without opening her eyes. 'A man?' she said. 'Whatever for?'

'I don't know,' said Muriel. 'But I suppose I shall have to go and see.'

She pulled herself out of the deep chair, tugged at her creased skirt, and went out of the room. Mrs Thorpe had almost dozed off again by the time she came back.

'Mother,' said Muriel, 'the man wants to see father. He says he's a police inspector.'

'Of course he isn't,' said Mrs Thorpe, opening her eyes. 'Don't be taken in by *that*.'

'He's an inspector all right,' said Muriel.* 'He showed me a silver badge thing inside his coat.'

'What does he want your father for?'

'He didn't say. He says he'll wait until he comes back. He says he'll walk about the garden, so I've let him.'

'Well, he'll be walking about for hours,' said Mrs Thorpe, punching up the sofa cushions and rearranging herself. 'But that's his lookout.'

'Yes, it is,' said Muriel, taking up her book and another chocolate.

They meant to settle back into comfort, but they couldn't. Although Mrs Thorpe closed her eyes and Muriel had hers on her book, both of them were conscious that something kept moving outside the windows. A homburg hat appeared round the rhododendrons, or crossed the

lawn and passed down the drive, only to reappear round the rhododendrons.

'Oh, drat that man!' said Mrs Thorpe in the end. She heaved her legs to the floor and sat up. 'It's no good trying to rest with him walking about the garden. It's getting on my nerves. What does he want with your father?'

'I haven't any idea,' said Muriel. 'It'll be nothing much. Car licence, or something at the office.'

'Well, early though it is, let's have tea,' said Mrs Thorpe. 'I feel I could do with a cup.'

'All right,' said Muriel, going out to put the kettle on.

But when she came back with the tea tray, and sandwiches, scones, and cakes, they still could not forget the man in the garden. No sooner had they settled to tea than there was a scatter of rain on the windows, and in a moment a heavy shower was falling.

'Drat that man,' said Mrs Thorpe again. 'Now we shall have to ask him in. Go and fetch him, Muriel,' she said with resignation. 'Bring him in here. We'll have to give him a cup of tea.'

'No need to bring him in here,' said Muriel, getting up once more. 'He could have it in the kitchen.'

'No. Bring him in here,' said Mrs Thorpe. 'Then I can find out what he's come for.'

Mrs Thorpe sighed for her Saturday afternoon as she watched Muriel, in the drive, gesticulating at the man, who had taken refuge among the rhododendrons. In a moment, Muriel brought him in through the sitting-room door — a tall, solid man who needed no silver badge to proclaim himself a policeman.

'Good afternoon,' said Mrs Thorpe with dignity. (He ought to realize what an interruption he was.) 'You can't wait out there in this rain. You'd better sit down and have

a cup of tea.'

'Thank you, Madam,' said the man stiffly. 'But that's not necessary. I'm on duty.'

'There's nothing in the regulations about not having tea, I suppose,' said Mrs Thorpe, more amiably.

'No, Madam.'

'Sit down, then,' said Mrs Thorpe, pouring tea.

The man looked as if he would rather not, but he took an upright chair near the door and put his hat beneath it. Then he waited with a corrugated brow for Muriel to bring tea to him.

'Sandwich?' asked Muriel.

The man hesitated, then took one and put it on his saucer.

'Well?' said Mrs Thorpe, settling back against the cushions and stirring her tea. 'And what is it you want to see my husband about?'

The inspector coughed. 'I'd rather wait till he comes,' he said.

'Oh, nonsense,' said Mrs Thorpe easily. 'He might be another two hours. You can't sit there saying nothing for all that time. What is it? Is it something to do with the office? Has there been a burglary or something?'

'No. Nothing of that kind,' said the inspector, chewing stolidly, without looking at her.'

'There's no need for all this mystery,' said Mrs Thorpe. 'If you can tell Mr Thorpe, you can tell me. I'm his wife. I shall know sooner or later, shan't I? So what is it?'

The inspector looked more uncomfortable than ever. Muriel offered sandwiches, but he shook his head.

'Do,' invited Muriel.

He shook his head again. 'It's this way, Madam,' he said, looking straight at Mrs Thorpe with light, clear

eyes. 'I don't think I'd be so welcome if you knew what I've come about.'

'Oh?' said Mrs Thorpe with interest. 'Well, I can't think of anything that would make me grudge you another sandwich, so help yourself and get this business off your chest.'

'Very well, Madam, if you will have it,' said the man. But still he didn't tell her.

'Come along, man,' said Mrs Thorpe. 'For goodness sake!'

'I'd sooner not in front of the young lady,' the inspector said.

Mother and daughter burst out laughing. 'You don't need to mind about *me*,' Muriel assured him. 'After all, I'm a big girl now.'

'You're making me downright curious,' said Mrs Thorpe, taking a scone. She always made a good tea. 'Come along, now. Out with it.'

'Well,' said the inspector, coughing again. 'It's about Miss Foxhall.'

He glanced swiftly at Mrs Thorpe, as if this must startle her.

'And who's Miss Foxhall?' said Mrs Thorpe, unstartled.

'You've never heard of her?'

Biting into the crumbly scone, Mrs Thorpe shook her head.

'Miss Foxhall was a friend of your husband's,' said the inspector.

'My husband must know a lot of people I don't know,' said Mrs Thorpe. 'And vice versa. But what's so particular about this Miss Foxhall?'

'She's dead,' said the man.

'Poor thing,' said Mrs Thorpe, unmoved. 'But what's that to us?'

'She was found dead — gassed — about an hour ago. There was a letter to your husband beside her.'

'A letter to my husband?' repeated Mrs Thorpe. 'Did she want him to do something for her?'

'Not exactly that,' said the inspector. He wished this woman would give him a little help.

'How old was this Miss Foxhall?' asked Muriel, coming to him with the scones.

He shook his head. If they could eat, he couldn't. He didn't relish jobs of this kind.

'She was about forty-two,' he said.

'Why did she kill herself?' asked Mrs Thorpe.

The inspector drew in his breath.

'Well, as a matter of fact,' he said, 'your husband had been a friend of hers for a long time, but a week or two ago he broke with her, it seems — and, well, there you are,' he said, turning his hands out.

There was a silence in the room while mother and daughter stared at him.

'Broke with her?' said Mrs Thorpe.

'Yes, Madam,' said the inspector.

There was another silence, except for the gusts of rain against the windows.

'Are you trying to tell me,' said Mrs Thorpe, leaning forward, 'that my husband, George Thorpe, had been living with this woman?'

'I'm just stating the facts, Madam.'

'Facts?' said Mrs Thorpe loudly. 'I never heard anything so silly in all my life. Have you, Muriel? Your father living with a woman and her gassing herself because he'd broken with her?'

'Never!' said Muriel vehemently. 'I never heard such rubbish in my life.'

They turned their flushed, angry faces on the inspector. He said nothing.

'What do you mean by this tale?' demanded Mrs Thorpe.

He looked at her gravely. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'But it's true.'

His tone carried conviction. They began to believe him, The colour ebbed slowly from their faces. Mrs Thorpe put down her cup and saucer with a sudden clatter, and Muriel went quickly to her.

'Mother!' she said, but Mrs Thorpe thrust her aside, so that she could look at the inspector.

'How long had this been going on?' she asked.

'About fifteen years, I should think,' he said.

'Fifteen years!' cried Mrs Thorpe. 'Fifteen years?'

'Well, we've known of it for about that time,' he said,

'You've *known* of it?' she echoed again.

'The police do know these things,' said the inspector apologetically. 'You see, he'd set her up in a house. At the other end of the town.'

'Oh! A house! A house, Muriel!' cried Mrs Thorpe distractedly. She reached up and clasped Muriel's arm, 'Fifteen years in a house with a woman, and we never dreamed of it! Muriel, can you credit it? George — your father — so quiet, with no life in him at all. Not for *us*, anyhow. And she's killed herself for him—'

'Look,' said Muriel, pointing to the window. 'He's coming back.'

Mrs Thorpe got to her feet and they stared at him, the one who had gone away a few hours earlier so familiar coming back a stranger. They had never known him, and yet they had gone through him so often, like an old suit, so sure there was nothing in any of the pockets. And for

fifteen years he had been living a life they knew nothing of, finding love somewhere else, and was involved now in tragedy and scandal, dragging them into it, too.

They watched him come up the drive, holding his hat on, and when he was out of sight, their eyes turned to the door of the room.

He came in, chafing his hands.

'I stopped out as long as I could, but I couldn't stand this wind any longer,' he said, and added with quiet bitterness, 'Sorry to spoil your afternoon.'

Then he saw the inspector.

ALAN WYKES

Light

IN the load room Thacker had half a million horsepower under his control. He was a small rough-featured man with icy eyes, cynical and unsmiling and had worked in the power station, coldly efficient, for thirty years. He was now one of the four load controllers who commanded absolutely the distribution of power among the city's eight sub-stations during the twenty-four hours of every day and night.

That September evening Thacker was on the six-to-midnight shift. Walking to work with his jacket over his arm and his black tin sandwich box sticky with sweat in his hand he could feel the storm pressing down on the city. Far away to the north a faint pink flame flickered behind the hills. Thacker thought with faintly sensual pleasure: 'We'll see who's master.'

Perhaps because he was so completely master of himself he used the phrase, in word and thought, often.

He'd used it to Walter once: 'You can get out and stay out. No kid of mine's going to act that way twice and get away with it. We'll see who's master.'

The traffic wound through the hot streets. A fast car sped past him leaving a little flurry of cool air.

Thacker had a momentary glimpse of the man in the back. Somehow the glimpse tied up with the thought of Walter. Thacker startled himself by thinking: It'll be cool in the load room. The thought of coolness was something he could lean on: it was as if the recollection of Walter had been painful.

He went in through the turbine room nodding to one and another; but his eyes were as cold and his lips as dry as the stone stairs to the load room. 'Nothing shakes Thacker': after thirty years there was no longer any need to speak the phrase that had paved the way to the load distributor's job. It was like a legend or a superstition: everyone took it for granted.

Lowry, whom Thacker was relieving, rose from the kidney-shaped glass-topped desk. The wall before the desk conformed to its curve. The sub-station meters, each with its ruby and blue pilot lights, stared out from the glossy black panels above the illuminated section map of the city.

'The storm's going to hit north-west first, but central's your worry tonight. The old man's been on the wire. Some Fuel and Power bug's visiting and the old man's trying to get things moving for a new sub-station. Seems efficiency's the only thing that's likely to impress the bug. So God help you if you let the lights off in central.'

'Central,' Thacker said. 'I'll remember.'

He sat in the leather-padded steel chair at the desk feeling without emotion the slow seeping of power into his veins. Through the floor-to-ceiling windows on either side of him he could look out over the city. He tidied the desk, the three telephones, the report pad with the last entry timed 5.53, the evening paper which Lowry had left. Eye and brain took in the information on dials and pilots. The frequency graph was dead steady on fifty cycles, the demands of the town's five districts registered on the quivering needles as shops closed and theatres opened up.

Thacker called Ballards Road, Lowry's action as entered on the report pad wasn't firm enough. 'Warned Firth Street to stand by with three spare generators to feed

Central in case of insulation breakdown on Ballards Road.' It wouldn't do: it was too narrow a margin.

'Thompson? Have your number four, five and six generators ready to come in if I call for them.'

'Right.' There was no argument, no appeal against Thacker's orders. The ultimate responsibility was his.

He dialled the Met. Office. 'When's the storm likely to break?'

'It's raining already out here — sheets of it. Half an hour'll see it over town.'

It would be man against storm then. The whole system was insulated and fitted with arrestors from beginning to end but there was nothing that could be proof against the million volt charges if lightning struck and found its way to earth through the transformer stations — and it often did, somewhere. The length of the breakdown depended entirely on how fast the load-distributor's mind could work out the switch-through from one sub-station to another without imposing an impossible overload.

Thacker looked forward to the breaking of the storm. In his icy eyes, because he was alone, there gleamed some spark of something akin to pleasure.

Somewhere Thacker had a wife who had left him. First Walter, then Alice. But it was all a very long time ago and he never showed any signs of caring. People said, 'He's too hard and cold to care.' Ruthless: he had a name for ruthlessness. People said the business over Walter had been very slight — nothing more than a high-spirited boy's prank; and Alice — she wasn't the only woman who'd left a man for being over-bearing about what was probably nothing more than a mild flirtation. Thacker had no heart at all. Everyone said so.

He leaned his forearms on the desk, moving the report

pad so that it would not be soiled by sweat. The evening paper slid out. 'Men rob pawnbroker in busy London district.' All the details were there: the hold up, the tiny Jew with his amazing and unexpected fury, the desperation, the spanner blow on the incredibly hard and wizened skull. There was a chance of the shopkeeper recovering, the paper said; and the police had a clue . . . something about the assailants making noth.

Thacker read that much and shoved the paper aside. For some unaccountable reason he remembered Alice. She'd believed him to be completely heartless. They were all the same — men, women: when they sinned they wanted understanding. When they went straight they wanted praise. Thacker wanted nothing. He'd wanted nothing for many years.

There had been a time when he — and Alice — had been sick with desire. Their first child — a girl — had died. They'd wanted a son. It was as if the rigid imposition of the desire had brought them Walter. He could speak of the days — and did sometimes, with incredible calm, like a fakir whose self-crucelty is a matter of pride and honour. But when he was alone the last remaining wires of emotion tightened and twanged without being plucked.

'Thompson,' he said into the phone. 'Come in with three and four.'

Without moving he gathered power into the load room. The needles gently swung. The sky was darkening and the storm's approach was reflected in the city's demands for power.

'Ericsson? Drop 80,000 on circuit five.'

For twenty minutes the fluctuating needles kept him busy. He was controlling without appearing to do anything but speak into the 'phone in his cold level voice. South and

north-east were standing by on 100,000 kilowatts each, north-west and south-west on 25,000. The turbines, valves, automatic stokers, pylons, lines — the whole system was waiting for the storm to break. But Thacker was alone. He could cope with storms without effort. The wires of emotion twanged a little on the sore spot. Without moving his eyes from the dials he eased his wallet from his coat where it hung over the chair. The snapshots were all in there, carefully wrapped in cellophane. He spread them on the desk fanwise.

The snapshots showed a woman and a child in a walled-in suburban garden. You could see they'd all been taken on the same day. You could feel certain of the injunctions that must have been spoken, the care taken to have the sun over the left shoulder, the self-conscious poses of the woman, the shadows that had not been allowed for, the child's movements as the shutter clicked.

The complete record of the stupid and cacophonous cadence of Thacker's emotion was there in the spread of kodak snaps of a grubby child in a sunsuit and a pale and commonplace woman in a print dress from a cheap store's basement.

It was an emotion buried deep. He looked at the pictures of Walter and Alice time and again when he was alone. He looked at them to prove that he no longer cared. So he said.

Beyond the windows now the blackened sky fitted down on the world like a skull cap. Lightning seared through the clouds and the rain began its fusillade.

The outside 'phone rang. Thacker took it. A voice crackled down the line: 'Is that Mr Thacker?'

'Yes,' Thacker said coldly.

'Listen, I'm—' and suddenly the voice ceased. Thacker

took the other 'phone, said, 'Ericsson, give me 40,000 on circuit five.' Somewhere on the city's outskirts a factory had started up on the night shift and the needles slid slowly back across the dials. Ericsson came in with his extra banks and they paused and rose again. The first 'phone had gone dead. Thacker replaced it: puzzles of that nature didn't bother him.

The job was everything: the city's power was his completely, he could darken at will, stop movement, control destinies like a god.

'Don't let the lights go out in central.' He remembered the warning with contempt.

The thunder smashed at the walls. Something bothered Thacker. He couldn't have said what it was. If he had been a sentimental man he would have said it was the ghosts of the old remembered past. Alice and Walter. Possibly his standards were too high; but he was egotistical enough to know that his judgment of people, things, was invariably right.

He was alone. Emotion pulled at his thin mouth. A grubby kid with a bucket and spade in a suburban backyard, domesticity, the private life of a happy man — the longing for them was subdued, but in moments like this he realized that it had never quite died.

The outside 'phone rang again. It was the same voice, thin, whining a little, guarded, as if the speaker watched over his shoulder for a pursuer.

'It's me — Walter.'

Even in his solitude Thacker showed no sign of emotion but a thinning of the lips, an almost invisible twitching at their corners. He thought: So it *was* him in that car.

'You can get out — wherever you are.'

But he did not hang up. As if to fortify himself against

an appeal he said coldly, 'Wait'. The pause would let Walter dwell on hope. He stood the receiver on the evening paper blocking out the headline about the robbery.

A kind of icy satisfaction motivated his blood: he was right. You had a son and he took your love and smeared it with crime — little crimes first, big crimes later: petty thieving from Woolworths and lying about Sunday school grew into robbery with violence, perhaps murder.

But there was always the early delight to taunt you, the backyard happiness framed in memory, the days before promise had been smashed, when fulfilment was just round the corner. It pulled at your eyes and your heart. You despised sentimentality and it twanged its bowstring and arrowed you with a trite phrase: Blood's thicker than water.

Thacker took a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at his lip. The spangled lights of the city were vividly dimmed by long lines of lightning. Down in Firth Street the engineers would be waiting, sweating, to close valves, ease pumps, open the forced-draught fans; all the sub-stations were standing by for his command. Power was a source of strength: you could tap it like pride or courage or honour. He picked up the 'phone.

'Well?'

The voice went spurting desperately on. It too had a source of strength: hope.

'You're the man who can help me.' (Hope had edged the voice with spurious insouciance.) 'Soon as I saw you on your way to work an hour ago, I said, 'He'll give me a break for old times' sake.' '

'Old times' sake,' Thacker repeated coldly. 'You're mad. What do you want?'

'The police are after me. It's a mistake of course, but

I'm in an awkward position. I came home, knowing you'd hide me up a bit till things blow over. But they're sharp. They've circled an area, and I'm in it.'

Thacker said again, 'What do you want?' His fingers kept drumming on the snapshots. He was nauseated by his own weakness.

'Dark. It'll be pitch black in an hour from now. I could make a getaway if it wasn't for the blasted illuminations in this town. Get me?'

Thacker sweated. He'd wanted a son: the desire echoed through him; he felt pain press his eyes, his ribs, his temples. 'Listen. You're no—'

'I'll be waiting. I'm in Packer's Yard—' The voice ceased again abruptly, truncated by the terror of a man who fears for his life.

Packer's Yard. Thacker clicked the 'phone back on its rest. Almost without conscious design his glance picked out the spot on the illuminated map. It was plumb in the middle of central. Almost as if he could see the figure of his son skulking there among the derelict warehouses of the bombed area his eyes glinted.

So he'd come back home, made his appeal, awaited succour. Thacker thought: A son of mine shaking with fear down there in the yards. He had a sudden limitless desire to lay his head on the cold glass of the desk.

But the storm was playing havoc with the pylon lines. Somewhere lightning shorted to earth and a blue pilot light glowed on the panel; but the arrestors coped and red grew bright again.

'Drop 50,000 on section eight.'

Theatre curtains were going up now. In half an hour night would have added its blackness to the storm's clouds. Packer's Yard. It was an easy place to run to and an easy

place to surround. But the side streets leading away from it were narrow, quite. Without light—

You live for years combating sentimentality with the fervour of an old time saint. Armour and shield are prepared against it, and then there comes a time when the contempt you've sustained yourself on for years bubbles over like effervescence and thins into nothing. Because you remember the things you were taught in childhood: Forgive us our trespasses. . . . Blood's thicker than water.

The snapshots crumpled under his fingers. Forget them.

Whatever it was they'd meant had died long ago. Central mustn't be allowed to go dark. It wasn't the Fuel and Power bug; it was the job. It wasn't the fear of consequences, he was a trusted man — whatever he put on the report would be accepted without question, he had only to say it took him twenty, thirty minutes to clear central of ground circuits induced by lightning. (Twenty minutes: in his mind he considered how far you could run, knowing the streets you'd played in in childhood, in darkness. You'd be able to make the marshalling yards, get away in a goods truck.) It was the abuse of trust; even the knowledge that he had considered it was bitter.

'For a dirty swine like that,' he said aloud. He wanted to shout it, to quell the mad desire to give a man a chance. He tried desperately to ignore kinship: but it couldn't be done. Kinship pulled savagely at the strings and he felt his throat go dry.

He stuffed the snapshots away in his wallet. Forget that part. Forget happiness. Tear them up before they turned a sentimental weakness into complete rottenness. He took the pictures from his pocket again and tore them savagely into pieces. But all the time he knew it was just

an act he was putting on, that tomorrow he'd take the negatives from the bureau and have more prints made. It would go on like that always. Relinquishing a memory was impossible.

The storm was shattering to its climax now. He watched the livid wounds of lightning tear the sky's flesh apart. The meter needles were strangely still. It was as if they resisted the storm's fury with quiet indomitable calm. Thacker watched them for half an hour more. There were a few routine checks, nothing more. The system was riding the storm like an old and experienced fighter waiting for the attack.

The 'phone rang again. It was the old man's secretary. 'Controller? Sir George wants you.' And the harsh voice of the old man sounded below the storm: 'Who is it?'

'Thacker.' Thacker called no one Sir; it wasn't expected of him.

'Listen, Thacker. This government man's with me. You know what I want.'

'Yes. You want power.'

'That's it. But what I want even more is efficiency. This fellow knows no one can be blamed for an induced earth from lightning. But he'll expect quick action if the worst does happen. A lot depends on it. See to it.'

There was no waiting for any acknowledgment. Thacker replaced the 'phone. He plucked the evening paper across the glass top toward him. He felt sick. He knew, quite suddenly, that he was going to plunge the whole of central, deliberately, into darkness. He took up the other 'phone. 'Firth Street.' The direct order — he'd do it that way, take the consequences. The sub-station would obey without question. The generators' hum would be quietened to a standstill. He thought of the words he would put on the

report: I ordered Firth Street and Ballards Road to close down. No explanation — nothing. There'd be an enquiry. He wouldn't add a word to the report.

Ericsson's voice came back. 'Ericsson — 'for the first time Thacker hesitated. He could sense Ericsson's puzzlement. Ericsson waiting for orders. There were perhaps five seconds in which Thacker hesitated. In those five seconds the wire from the 'phone caught the evening paper and turned the corner. A sentence in the thickly printed stop-press caught his eye: 'Pawnbroker dies after robbery.'

And something else happened too. The storm had unpent itself to a superb climatic power. Thacker didn't see the purpling heroic flash that struck the grid five miles outside the city and thrust its awful pressure to earth through the transformer bank at Ballards Road. It wasn't necessary. A blue pilot winked and a needle slid slowly back and the circuit was broken. It was dark in central.

So in those few seconds there should have been confusion in Thacker's brain.

But there was no confusion. He saw each circumstance as clear cut as if it had been hewn from ice. He saw the hopeful flower of darkness blossom in Packer's Yard where a man lay skulking, the police slowly closing in, halted suddenly in the blackness, frustrated; the years and the crime stripped from the running man until, innocent, he stood in a backyard with a bucket and spade, the bitter streets down which his love had wandered, quiescent but never dead, for so many years; and an aged man with a battered head sprawled in a musty shop.

The hand of the clock clicked slowly round. It was dark in central. He'd be running now, thanking whatever he believed in for succour. Running while an old man lay rigid on a hospital bed. The puzzled voice of Ericsson

came clicking down the wire, shattered by the thunder. 'Controller? Do you want us to come in to boost Ballards? They're earthed.'

'D'you think I don't know?' Thacker said. 'Wait.' It was a pause in which the clarity of a decision was greater than he had ever known. Three more seconds. Eight seconds of darkness. He wouldn't be able to run far in eight seconds. Into the light — that was enough. Into view.

'Come in, Ballards,' he said. He even found time in the same space of seconds to wonder with cold cynicism if the Fuel and Power bug would be pleased with the controller's efficiency; and to remind himself that tomorrow he must get some more copies of those prints made.